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"WE CAUGHT HIM REDHANDED, SIR!" DECLARED ONE OF THE PROSPECTORS. "HE'S A STRANGLER!"

The Sparkler Sport;

OR,

The Stranglers of the Silver Slope.

BY JOS. E. BADGER, JR.

CHAPTER I.

THE SWOOP OF THE STRANGLERS.

"Pare an' ages! Phwat the devil!"

Barney O'Shea roused out of a dreamless slumber, starting to a sitting position through an instinctive sense of danger.

He caught an indistinct glimpse of a moving shape, and a half-angry, half-frightened cry escaped his lips; but ere he could do or say more, a nasty blow crashed against his skull, a heavy weight came upon his breast, forcing him backward, while an awful vise seemed to suddenly close about his throat.

Then—darkness and oblivion!

But the Irish cook and man-of-all-work owned a pair of lusty lungs, and, quickly though he was disposed of, his startled exclamation had at least in part aroused that peacefully sleeping camp, as sundry cries and ejaculations only too clearly proved.

A savage curse was likewise heard; then a coarse, rough voice was lifted in vicious authority:

"Jump 'em, lads! You know your duty; do it—red-hot!"

Until that moment all had been quiet and peaceful, the little encampment lying in that secluded valley under the silver light of the nearly full moon, undisturbed by fear of death or premonition of falling evil.

But now—

With short, savage cries and oaths the raiders sprang to their evil work, each member doing the part assigned him in advance, so far as the keen and watchful eyes of their leader could ascertain.

He himself stood close to the little tent within which their most valued prey had been located, and he it was who took such swift action a few moments later when half-clothed men burst forth from the larger tent, only half awake, if wholly alarmed.

"What is it? Who dares—"

"Lorella—my child!"

The tall, gray-haired man caught sight of yonder dark, armed shape near the shelter of his loved daughter, and heedless of his own helpless condition, sprang that way with a fierce cry; only to be brutally beaten down by a reversed revolver an instant later.

"Would ye, fool? Take a lie-down and think how—clean work, lads! you know your duty; do it, curse ye!"

Viciously issued, that command, he who gave it utterance crouching low and leaping swiftly aside to foil the fierce rush made by the younger man coming from the second tent.

"Out, ye devils! I don't know who—take that, curse you!" cried Allen Kirkwood, as he made his half-blinded rush, steadying himself a bit the surer to cover that dodging shape with the revolver which he had grasped at the first alarm.

Hammer fell and cartridge exploded, but no harm was done to mortal being by that shot; for, just then, a couple of sturdy fellows leaped upon their designated prey from the rear, bearing him swiftly to earth, the shock of fall alone seeming sufficient to place the young man *hors de combat*.

"Clean work, the bunch o' ye!" repeated their chief, his tones rising clear above the tumult. "You all know what—and so do I! Easy by jerks, my dainty darling!"

For the tent-flap was pushed aside and a fair young maiden showed under the clear moonlight, not even the terror of such an awakening sufficing to mar her rare beauty of face or figure.

Cat-like in his activity, the chief of the raiders grasped the girl, laughing aloud at her shrill cry of mingled fear

and indignation, one arm closing vise-like about her middle, his other hand rising to cover the lips which would have screamed again as she saw both her father and brother so vainly struggling in the grip of ruthless enemies.

For so it was.

Martin Kirkwood had dropped before that brutal blow, heavy enough to have killed many a stout fellow of half his age; but, stung by a father's fury, the gray head rose again, only to see his son overwhelmed and to be himself borne backward under a living weight too great for any one man to successfully resist.

"Give him the noose, ye devils!" fairly screamed the leader. "Show him how Jack Ketch works out in this wooden country! Give the public another sweet morsel to gag and make holy faces over, my lads! Do your work as though ye loved it, but—steady with the youngster, there!"

Lorella Kirkwood caught but a portion of this savage speech, but that was enough to turn her brain dizzy, and added to the struggles she was so fruitlessly making, brought a merciful blank over her senses for the time being.

One frantic effort to break away, then her sinews relaxed, her head drooped, her limbs quivered pitifully, and she lay a dead weight across that powerful left arm, captor laughing hoarsely at his easy victory while moving nearer the spot where lay old Martin Kirkwood in dire extremity.

The millionaire had fallen to earth close behind the larger tent, where the moonlight was intercepted, but that fact hindered his enemies in no sense. Two lusty fellows were holding his arms outstretched as he lay on the broad of his back, while a third ruffian was squatting astride his helpless body, hands ruthlessly applying the rope of the strangler!

"Gasp and wheeze and choke—choke—choke!" cried the man of the rope, grasping the two ends and fiercely tugging away, knee on chest and other foot digging into the dry dirt for a better purchase. "Choke and strangle—strangle like the sheep-killing cur which ye so often liken us poor devils to! Choke—smother—die, ye bloated aristocrat! Die—die—die!"

"Business before too much pleasure, old fellow!" spoke up the chief of the stranglers. "He's all right. Knot the rope and leave it—for a token! There are others who—ha!"

A cry from Allen Kirkwood as he rallied from his downfall, either seeing or guessing what horrible fate was befalling his aged parent; but strong hands were still upon his limbs, and a single word from their masked master sufficed to hurry both captive and captors away beyond sure eye-range of that impending tragedy.

Another harsh command caused bonds and a gag to be applied for the time being, and then his own particular prize was left in charge of the same men, the chief turning back to lead the close search made in both tents for plunder.

Here the masked chieftain was head and front of the movement, tearing up the cozy furnishings which only one who never felt the lack or need of money would think of supplying such an habitation, flashing the light into every nook and cranny, fiercely hoping for a discovery rich enough to amply repay both toil and trouble, present as well as proximate.

Here and there, first in the larger tent, then in the shelter held sacred to the use of Lorella Kirkwood, neglecting no spot, overlooking no article which could by any possibility contain or conceal the treasure so ardently longed for.

But all efforts proved in vain, so far as finding any vast amount of either money or money's worth went. A fairly fat wallet was found in the lower garments discarded for the night by Martin Kirkwood; far more money than any save a rich man would think of carrying around with him, yet but a trifle in comparison with the sum these midnight

raiders expected to win by their evil efforts.

Something of this truth was shown by the ugly curses and fierce words let fall by the masked leader in that swoop; but the disagreeable fact remained, and no searching on their part could alter the result.

Satisfied at length that the treasure (if any such was within the camp limits) was hidden past his arts to unearth, the chief of the stranglers crossed over to where brother and sister were held captive, one hand falling heavily upon a shoulder as he bent his face close to that of Allen Kirkwood, seemingly trying to read the whole truth in that pale visage ere he put the question.

"Where's the camp-chest, younker? Talk white, or ye'll pay for it in red. Now, I've got my hand in once more, I'd just as lieve add you to the list—if not a little rather!"

Instead of flinching from touch, glare or voice, Allen Kirkwood made another desperate effort to burst the bonds which held him so powerless, fiercest anger and deadliest hatred showing in his own face the while.

"Bah! you poor fool!" contemptuously cried the mask, reading something of all this with keen eyes. "At your best I'd handle you as a grown man might play with a puling infant, while now—look around ye, for a change!"

"Each and every one of these sweet-toothed bulldogs stand ready as eager to grip throat and drag ye down to the dust. One sign from my hand and they'd scatter your fragments to the four winds of the earth. One nod, and they'd give you the rope which—"

"Where have ye hidden it all away, curse you?" with abrupt change of tone and voice. "Tell me, or—the gold, the silver, the paper; where it is, fool?"

Those gloved hands gripped Allen Kirkwood by the shoulders, shaking him viciously, while those dark eyes lying back of the somber mask seemed to take fire and blaze with avaricious fury.

Poor Lorella gave a frightened cry at this, and the sound of her sweet voice appeared to recall the raider chieftain to his ordinary senses, for he drew back, letting his hands fall, and a low, harsh laugh cross his hidden lips.

"A cross-roads where two fools met, is it, younker? All right! That's a fault easily mended, and I'll set your precious clapper at liberty long enough to sing the song my ears are fairly honing for; the song of gold; dear gold!"

With another chuckling laugh in which lay slight mirth the arch knave flashed forth a knife, and with its keen edge touched the knotted thongs which held the gag in place, then speaking on in sterner tones:

"No nonsense now, young fellow. Turn up the dust or I'll turn up your toes. They've got a good bit the start of you, but I reckon you might catch up with the old gent by trying right smart!"

"Devil—you demon!" hoarsely panted Allen Kirkwood, as he spat forth that gag and caught his breath afresh.

"Steady, or I'll have to—"

"I know you—I recognized you at sight, you infamous cur!"

"What's that?"

"I'll have revenge! I'll hang you—hang you higher than Haman's ghost! Oh, you scoundrel! To think how often—and father always treated you like an own son! While now—"

A heavy hand dropped upon a shoulder. A vicious shake followed, and the man in mask spoke even more harshly than before:

"Are you turned crazy, you fool? What do you mean by such chatter?"

"That I know you, Ralph Innes!"

Lorella gave a choking cry at this name, and the mask recoiled as though involuntarily. Young Kirkwood spoke on, hotly:

"I knew you at sight, Ralph Innes, in spite of mask and disguise! I swear to hang you for this foul outrage, and never—"

"What name? What do you call me, fool?"

"By your rightful title, Ralph Innes. Cousin though you are—"

That gloved hand smote his lips with brutal force, cutting him short.

CHAPTER II.

STRANGLERS AND THEIR LIVING PREY.

The two men fell apart, one recoiling from the stroke, the other—who shall say?

A hoarse, barely articulate cry escaped his lips, and in obedience to it several of the stranglers rushed upon the young man, throwing him down in spite of his furious struggles against overwhelming odds.

Again Lorella Kirkwood screamed, and once again a deft hand smothered the sound, strong arms bearing her away from that spot, while a voice spoke close to her ear:

"Quiet, you silly child! There's no particular harm coming your way unless—no harm at all if you play half white, even! So—maybe the truth can leak out at your lips? You know where the old gent carried his stuff, sweetness?"

But that was too much to expect from one so terribly agitated, and presently the girl was turned over to a lesser light, thus leaving the chief of stranglers at liberty to pursue his fruitless quest for gold or its equivalent.

No such rich treasure was to be found, let them search as they might, and at length they were forced to recognize the truth.

Again the leader of that raiding band turned to Allen Kirkwood, pressing him with fiercely impatient questions, only to be met after the same fashion; to be cursed as a worse than ingrate by one who called him cousin!

Long ere this both tents had been thoroughly overhauled by eager searchers, and though one and all were loth to abandon the hope of greater profit, word was finally given for getting under way.

"It's pick foot and travel, my lads!" cried the leader, gruffly. "If we slip up on our calculations right here, we'll hit 'em so much the heavier next deal."

"And the cold meat, boss?"

"Leave it for the crows and camp-birds to worry over. No time for sentiment or folly now. Get a hustle on and—look to the youngster there. I'll take charge of this—come, my bunch of dainty sweetness!"

In spite of their struggles brother and sister were forced away from the spot, hurried along through the night as though a fear of detection had suddenly assailed the raiders.

The poor, terrified girl called upon her father, begging piteously to be taken back to him, now thinking him dead, then picturing him as alive and calling for her, only ceasing when overtasked nature gave way in part, leaving her brain dazed for the time being and herself in a half-stupor which was hardly less merciful than complete insensibility.

As for Allen Kirkwood, he fought until he could struggle no more. He was bound and gagged, helpless to fight or to flee, using his feet merely because reason told him worse punishment would come if he forced his captors to actually carry him over that rough ground.

That method of traveling did not last long, for the little company soon reached the spot where their horses had been left lest the sound of hoofstrokes give premature alarm to their intended prey.

During their brief pause at this place, Lorella Kirkwood was transferred for safe-keeping to another ruffian, while the chief of the stranglers drew nearer to the brother, his tones sounding cold and composed as he broke the silence.

"Maybe you'll think me an idiot for taking it up again, young fellow, but I never did care to hide my light under another man's bushel. So—what was it you called me, back yonder?"

Again his keen blade came into play, and once again that name was spoken.

"Ralph Innes. I can't call you cousin, as of old, for—oh, you infernal scoundrel!" with a sudden burst of fury. "Turn me free for just one minute, and I'll kill you like—like you butchered my poor old daddy—your uncle, devil of all devils!"

"And you really think I am the fellow you say?"

"I know it! I could take my Bible oath to you among a million such! I knew you at sight, and now—kill me, you whelp of Satan! Kill me, even as you murdered my poor old father, or I'll hunt you down to the gallows just so surely as grass grows and water runs!"

"You're cracked; badly cracked, younker!" coolly retorted the chief of the stranglers. "So far from being Ralph Innes, I am—listen, my pretty boy with the vitriolic tongue!"

"I hide behind no man's back, and advertise my deeds as one does who glories in his actions. I am not your cousin; I am not Ralph Innes, nor Ralph anybody else; I am—Jack Ketch, at your service, sir!"

With a low, mocking laugh the strangler turned away as though in saying this all had been said, paying not the slightest attention to the words which Allen Kirkwood hurled after him.

Then that young man moved over to where his sister was standing under guard, still with senses half-numbed, yet sufficiently alert to recognize and welcome Allen with a low, sobbing cry.

Unheeding her broken speech, even if he heard, Allen burst into fierce denunciations of their cousin, evidently with belief still unshaken in his guilt, finally adding:

"You saw him? You surely recognized him, Lorella? Ralph—"

"No, no, it was not—it surely could not be my—our Ralph?"

"It surely was, though! And he murdered, if I had the full use of my hands for just one little minute, even! If I might—"

"Will you cork it up, young fellow?" came a harsh interruption as the man in mask once again turned toward his captives. "Still that unruly clapper of yours, unless you wish me to muzzle it with bullet or steel. I never saw such a steady, sweetness!"

"It is not—oh, sir, you are not—say you are not Ralph?"

"I'd lie if I said I was, Pretty-by-night," came the swift answer. "I'm Jack Ketch, the Strangler, neither more nor less. And this sort of chatter makes me so weary that I'm going to—all aboard!"

Catching Lorella in his powerful arms, Jack Ketch swung her deftly upon horseback, nimbly climbing up after her an instant later.

Again Allen Kirkwood was grasped by strong hands, swung clear of the ground and placed in a saddle, there to be securely bound as though for a protracted journey through the night.

He spoke some harsh words, but seemingly the leader had lost all patience for such, sternly addressing his fellows:

"Clap a stopper on, there. He'd ought to be worth more living than dead, but if he will sing out of tune—kill, if you can't cure!"

Holding Lorella firmly yet lightly the arch-ruffian rode away through the night, followed by his fellows, two of whom paid especial attention to the other living prey.

Among the lesser lights in that midnight raid, dissatisfaction (if nothing worse) reigned the while, and after the trail had lengthened by several miles, one of their number growlingly spoke:

"If ever I'm caught on another jaunt like this, you can eat my fat!"

"Augh! what's eating you, now?"

"It's too bloody work for white men, and that's flat! It'll end in a nasty bit o' hemp-pullin', an' my thrapple isn't honin' fer the like o' that; no, it hain't now, gents!"

"Bah! there always was a yellow streak in you, Nels Crooks! A cur you were born, and a cur you are now!"

"You're a liar, Pete Peltz!"

Swiftly came the retort, and to the full as swift was the answer, in actions rather than in words.

A long arm straightened, a heavy fist shot forth to land heavily in that half-turned face, knocking its owner fairly out of the saddle to hit the ground with stunning force.

He who dealt the blow leaped after, with wild-beast ferocity, cursing and snarling, champing his teeth as a half-wild boar vents its rage, jerking knife from sheath even while in the air.

"I'll cut your heart out, Nels Crooks! I'll paint yellow with red so mighty sudden you can't—out of the way, blame ye all!"

For a fierce cry from the lips of Jack Ketch sent several men between the twain, and they hampered the savage brute long enough for the chief to push that way, leaning over in the saddle to strike that shaggily-bearded face with gloved hand as he cried, sternly:

"Back, you brute! Do you want me to down you for good, Peltz?"

"Better down him, boss! He'll sell you out, so sure as white isn't black. I know Nelson Crooks, and I know—"

"You're a liar! An' I kin frail ye out like a—let me git at him—jest once't!"

Instead, the struggling fellow was faced by a menacing muzzle, as Jack Ketch swung that way, revolver in hand, speaking sternly:

"You simmer down, old man. I'd hate to lift your roof, but if I have to do it—simmer, then."

Whatever else he might be, Jack Ketch was evidently master, so far as these tough nuts were concerned, and only surly growls gave evidence that his interference had not entirely quelled the racket.

The journey was resumed and pressed at a rapid pace for mile after mile before another halt was called. But then Jack Ketch both spoke and acted as though their night's work was nearing its end.

"Here we are, lads! You know what to do now; do it!"

Two-thirds of their number dismounted, turning their nags over to the men who remained in saddle, and then the Strangers broke apart, each man taking his own way as though their present purpose was to blind their trail against possible pursuit.

One of these footmen bore marks of a heavy fist in bruised cheek and discoloring eye, a horny hand lifting now and again to touch the place as though the injury pained him.

He hurried along through the night for a brief space, then came to a halt, turning partly around to shake a clenched fist in that direction with undisguised hatred, words falling mutteringly from his lips.

Curses and threats against the ruffian who had assaulted him, then came other and even more significant words:

"Better pull hemp then live sech a dog's life as this! I'll tell—only fer my pore little gal, I'd blow the gaff on 'em all! I'd tell the hull bloody story afore sun could set this blessed day; yes I would!"

CHAPTER III.

STEVE STARLIGHT, THE SPARKLER SPORT.

It was a bit of gently undulating ground across which Stephen Starlight was riding, and as his head came above the low crest ahead, he tightened reins and checked the spirited horse he bestrode, mustached lips parting with a low ejaculation.

"Hello! That looks something like business, for a fact! Wonder who and what—go easy, there!"

As a rule trees and even lesser vegetation were precious scarce in that particular region, but yonder where the ground lay lower, not more than a third of a

mile in advance of the Sparkler Sport's present position, a few wind-bent and sun-distorted specimens of cedar found root, and about them he sighted a few human beings, just then engaged in the delicious amusement of—

"A necktie party, as I'm a sinner! Reckon we'll take a look into that matter, pardner, so—look at that, will ye?"

Sparkler Steve had no partner save his own good steed, but he had grown accustomed to making a confidant of that really intelligent creature for lack of a better partner; and now, as he saw a sudden change take place in the situation beyond, a touch of gleaming spur and quick pinch of booted knees sent the animal springing over that crest, carrying his master into fair view of the rest of that little drama.

For, with a desperate effort the apparently doomed man had broken away from his enemies, knocking one endlong here, hurling another brace of lusty fellows sprawling yonder, then running for dear life away from the looped rope which dangled from the stoutest cedar.

A shot or two stung sharply upon the mountain air, but the fugitive raced on, ducking and dodging, springing erratically from side to side, the better to foil his pursuers, for hot in chase came the lynchers, now cursing and yelling like veritable fiends.

One against half a dozen and that poor devil apparently too sorely frightened to make the best of his briefly won advantage, losing ground with each moment while striving to evade the bullets which were no longer flying.

Sparkler Steve saw all of this, and saw, too, how the chasers were separating to force their prey to a straight line of flight, feeling too certain of success now to make further use of their weapons.

A pile of rock in goodly measure masked his own charge, and his coming was not noted by any until he fairly broke cover, lifting his voice in a clear, ringing call, which startled the pursuers even more than it did the luckless fellow in flight for dear life.

"Steady, all! What do you-all reckon you're trying to do down here, anyway? I never thought—hello, Perkins!"

"Ride him down, thar, boss!" cried one of those in chase, wildly waving a hand toward the Sparkler Sport. "Ef the p'izen critter dodges—trample him clean through the airth, thar!"

"Howly mother o' all the saints! Bad luck to the lave o' yez, thin!" panted the fugitive, falling all over himself, as he tried to change his course in an instant, clearly mistaking the horseman for another relentless enemy rather than a friend. "Oi niver, niver, no Oi niver!"

"Barney O'Shea, is it?" cried Starlight, sending his good horse in between the fugitive and chasers, his right hand dropping to his revolver butt as he sternly added: "Hold hard, the lot of ye! Show good cause for roping, or I'll play ringmaster, by my lonesome!"

Charges and denials came all in a heap, too badly mixed for ready comprehension, but that chase has ended now, and with Sparkler Steve master of the situation a minute more or less hardly cut any figure.

The fugitive clung closely to his present defender for the time being, rapidly recovering both breath and wits, even smoothing down his rather peculiar attire where rough handling and hot racing had put it in disorder.

From that tangle of ugly accusations Starlight made out that this fellow had been guilty of murder most foul, adding to that awful crime the worse fact of being a member of the thrice-accursed Stranglers.

"Ow-wow! Will yez moind that, thin? An' me wan o' the dacintest o' lads ye'd foind in a long day's jarney, sor! An' the loikes av thim thryin' to pent the son av me ould mither—"

"We caught him redhanded, sir," declared one of the prospectors, cutting that indignant protest short off. "He's a

Strangler, and we can prove it by—you know it, boys? Didn't we, then?"

"You bet we did, then! Caught the bloody Irisher with the devil's noose in his grip, making sure his dirty work was well done!"

"'Tis an avil loie, yer hanner, be the powers!"

"'Tis gospel truth, you flannel-mouthed Paddy!"

"Augh-gh-h! Don't ye swally that, sor, for divil a Paddy is Barney O'Shea, thin! Oi'm a thrue Yankee, born an' brid, sor. Be me driss an' luuks Oi show it, faith! Paddy to yer ownsilf, ye dirthy scut av a dirthier bogthrotter, begob!"

As he fairly howled forth this denial and defiance combined, Barney O'Shea drew his tall figure as erect as possible, hands nervously flitting the swallow-tails of his rusty-looking coat, doing all he knew how to rob face and form of the Emerald Isle touch, but only accentuating both and adding more "hair to his teeth."

Ordinarily this would have stirred Stephen Starlight to open mirth, but not now; he had cause for gravity instead, and almost harshly spoke:

"Quiet, one and all! Now, what's happened? Who's been bloody murdered, or is it all a farce betwixt ye?"

"Poor ould masther Kirkwood, sor—" "The campers, over yonder—"

"What?" cried Starlight, cheeks paling a bit, but eyes fairly aglow with fiercest excitement. "Surely not—ha! now I remember where I've seen you, Paddy! You were over—murdered, you say, Perkins?"

"Bloody murdered, no less! We just happened that way, you see, sir, and when we sighted this blamed Irisher, rope in his grip, making sure the old gent was croaked—"

"That's a loie be the town-clock, sor! Oi niver knew how it ahl came to pass, faith, but some dirthy divil hit me wid a club phwich wor a mountain foor bigniss, sure! An' thin—"

With a sudden stoop and clutch Sparkler Steve caught the sorely excited Patlander by arm and hip, giving a mighty heave which brought the stalwart fellow fairly across the withers of his snoring steed, holding Barney there with a giant's grip as he swiftly spoke to the other men:

"Come! Show the way over to the spot, Perkins. If there's been evil work going on—you say—the young lady, boys?"

"Never sighted her, sir. Just saw enough to make sure it *was* ugly work, then we had to run this rascal down like a crazy wolf with his tail on fire!" hastily explained Perkins, as he ran along to keep pace with the now hurrying horseman.

Sparkler Steve evidently knew where that raided camp was located, since he asked no questions on that point, making all possible haste in that direction, paying not the slightest heed to the spluttering cries and panting objurgations let fall by the unlucky cook and man-of-all-work.

Thanks to the lay of the ground, together with the point from which his approach was made, Starlight came upon the scene almost without warning, and gave a sharp cry as he saw, only a few yards ahead, the shape of a human being struggling to a sitting posture, though movements were uncertain and gestures confused to a degree.

"Kirkwood—and still living!" cried the Sport, wrenching up his horse and leaping to earth while hastily adding: "Look to Barney, will you, fellows? Hold him safe until we can get at the bottom facts."

The final words were still warm on his lips as the Sparkler won the side of that gray-haired victim, and another exclamation was given as he saw—wonder of wonders!

A greasy rope was wound around Martin Kirkwood's throat with ends brutally

knotted by murderous hands; yet the old gentleman still lived, still breathed—and that with no serious difficulty!

"Quick!" cried Sparkler Steve, hand backing tongue as he called attention to that strange sight. "Look, all of you, for it may be important when—see it, you fellows?"

A stout stick lay with one end against shoulder, the other hidden among that rumpled gray hair. Both turns of the Strangler's rope passed around stick as well as neck, and thus a space was left for breathing where a casual look would tell of sure suffocation.

"Not once in a million times!" declared the Sport as he cut the rope and drew free that stick. "A lucky accident—Providence, rather!"

Martin Kirkwood made a feeble motion, lips parting as though to speak; but only a husky rattle found vent through that fevered throat.

The next few minutes were spent in efforts for his more perfect restoration, yet the Sparkler was hardly content to wait for information so long, flinging queries and questions at both prospectors and captive.

The former were glib enough in telling their part of the story, for even now they felt little doubt that Barney O'Shea deserved rope rather than reprieve.

They had come down from the higher grounds, where weeks had been spent in prospecting, and that early movement brought them within eye-range of the valley-camp shortly after the rising of the sun.

They quickly saw that something out of the common must have taken place, and by quick creeping they drew nigh enough to make out Barney O'Shea, rope in hand, bending over the prostrate figure of another man—Martin Kirkwood, as they all knew now.

"We saw that much, Mr. Starlight," said Perkins, "but we hadn't time for much more. Paddy smoked us, and away he loped—tail-on-end!"

"Whoy w'u'dn't Oi, thin, sor?" eagerly cut in the cook, face flushed and little eyes glowing brightly. "Wid the hid av me ahl caved in; wid a rope chokin' the loife av me ahl out—a rope, sor, phwich thim same divils musht hev mishured out to me, faith, loike they did foor the ould gintlemon, sor, an' thin—whin ahl kem a-howltin' an' a-yowltin' worse nor so many divils frish cut loose from—ow-wow!"

Choked by his emotions, Barney O'Shea tried to eke his story out with frantic gestures instead.

Like one whose patience had failed him, Sparkler Steve made a swift spring and fierce grip, holding the Irishman helpless in both hands while staring with eyes ablaze into his rugged countenance.

A half-score moments thus, then Starlight demanded:

"The young lady—Miss Kirkwood—where is she, you scoundrel?"

"Miss Lorella, is it, sor?"

"You know it, O'Shea. Where is she now? What has happened her? And the other—her brother, as well?"

"Divil a wan o' me knows that same, sor. Oi wor just—"

"Careful, Barney! It's mighty clean hands you want to be showing, or else it's a mighty sudden grave you'll be filling," sternly warned the Sport, giving captive a bit of a shake by way of emphasis.

"Better string him up with his own rope, sir," gruffly cut in Perkins, who seemingly held scant faith in this son of the Emerald Isle. "I reckon you can get the straight of it from the old gent, while this fellow—it'd tear his thrapple clean out to tell anything like the naked truth; yes, it would, now!"

"Niver listhen to the loikes av that dirthy scut, sor; he's a bloody Orange-mon, faith, an' yez know how the loikes av thim hates us—us clane-brid an' pure-blooded Yankees, sor, loike yersilf an' me own mither's bye—begorra!"

In spite of his intense eagerness to

learn more, Sparkler Steve had to smile at this bald-faced twist of the truth; but his grip was broken just then by Barney O'Shea, who gave a husky sort of cry, at the same time pointing toward a rapidly approaching shape, then saying:

"Ask him, sor! Sure, an' he kin till a mointy soight more than anny wan o' us ahl—av he loikes, sor!"

CHAPTER IV.

THE TRAIL OF THE STRANGLERS.

There was no time for asking just what those hasty words really meant, for the person indicated was coming at a dead run, face and actions declaring how powerfully that sight had excited him.

How long he may have been viewing both scene and actors from yonder gentle rise in the ground could only be surmised; but now he paused to ask no questions, stopped to make no sign of recognition as he rushed directly to the spot where Martin Kirkwood was leaning feebly against a boulder near the larger tent.

"Uncle—dear Uncle Martin!" he exclaimed as he reached that spot, sinking to his knees by the injured man's side even as he flashed a swiftly inquiring glance around in quest of others. "What's the matter with you? What has happened? Where is—Lorella? Where is my dear cousin, Uncle Martin?"

"Gone—devils—gone!" huskily moaned the stricken millionaire, as he vainly strove to regain his feet.

"Gone?" echoed Ralph Innes, starting erect and clenching hands as he fairly glared about the place. "Surely not—gone whither? Gone where? Gone—how gone, uncle?"

Sparkler Steve stepped to the front, one hand going forth to rest lightly upon a shoulder, eyes full of keen and searching light as they caught those brown orbs.

"You can't explain the mystery, Mr. Innes, of course?" he half-asked, half-asserted.

"I don't—where are the others? What has happened, sir? Surely nothing which—what does all this mean, I say?"

"You did not spend the night here, then, sir?"

"No; I staid in town. I had business which—you tell, confound you, since Kirkwood can't. What has happened here? Where is my—Miss Kirkwood—and her brother, Allen?"

"That's precisely what we're trying all we know how to get at, Mr. Innes," gravely answered Starlight, veiling those brilliant blue eyes for an instant, as though hardly ready to let the latest comer peer too deeply into his secret thoughts. "If Mr. Kirkwood can't tell, and Paddy won't tell—"

"Where is he? Ha, you rascal!" striding across to where the Yankified Irishman was standing under guard. "If you know—"

"Wu'dn't Oi be afther tillin' av it, thin, sor, widout foocin'?"

"There's a way of making him chirp in tune, sir," bluntly hinted Nat Perkins. "I've seen many a better man strung up without a tree to help him do the climbing, too! Shall we—"

"Wait a bit, old man; time enough for the hempen finish after all other means are fairly exhausted. Surely we ought to be able to get at the rights of this nasty case between us! And so—cool and steady wins farther in a day than hot and hasty!"

That was an adage easily spoken, but practice was found far more difficult than theory.

With forced calmness Ralph Innes backed up the Sparkler Sport in his questioning, striving all either man knew to get at the actual facts; but neither Martin Kirkwood nor Barney O'Shea seemed able to give them the much-desired clew.

The old gentleman could only sneak of his sudden rousing from a deep slumber by—just what he could not tell even now.

He seemed partially dazed by the cruel

blow which had laid him out in the first place, and his later treatment had made a bad matter far worse.

In spite of his efforts to "brace up," all could see that Mr. Kirkwood was still far from being out of danger from his hurts.

But little better success came through questioning Barney O'Shea, although he could recall struggling desperately with numerous armed foemen who seemed vomited forth by the darkness.

He declared that he caught one scream as of fright or pain from the lips of his young mistress, then went down under a mass of flesh and bones to have the noose of the Strangers wound tightly about his throat.

"Yez kin see foor your own silves, faith!" he declared, turning down his high collar to bare his long neck more completely. "Faith, sor, it's Barney O'Shea as faals loike he had bin hoong up as a flich av bacon foor shmokin', thin, begorra!"

In honest truth there was a red and swollen welt about his neck which helped to bear out his statement; and Ralph Innes frankly cleared the Irish cook of further suspicion.

"Barney's all right, gentlemen. I'll go his bail so far as any crooked dealings goes. Only—can't you tell, O'Shea? Think how awful much may depend upon our finding Miss Lorella without further delay! Think what she must suffer if in such evil clutches, man, dear!"

"Av Oi c'u'd save her be takin' that same place me own silf, sor, 'tis Barney O'Shea w'u'd break the blissid nick av him gittin' thayer! But phwat more kin a poor divil do or say? 'Tis me that niver saw more than jist that, faith! The crack Oi got ahn the nob o' me, begorra!"

With a fiercely impatient gesture Ralph Innes turned away from the Irishman, as though abandoning all hope of gleaning further information from that source.

"Hunt for a trail, men!" he cried, setting an example himself while speaking. "Every minute wasted like this is only adding another death to my—to a lady whom we owe a sacred duty as white men! Look for sign, and we'll get there even yet!"

Sparkler Steve tried again to learn something more definite from the lips of the sufferer, but Martin Kirkwood lay helpless for the time being, looking more like one dying than one on the high-road to recovery.

So far as careful manipulation went, no fracture could be found, although that scalp was cut and the flesh raised in an ugly-looking ridge across the skull.

Eager though he surely was to be of service to the missing young people, Starlight felt that his first duty was owing this man, and with an eye to that end he crossed over to where Ralph Innes was quartering the dry and stony ground, searching for the trail of the raiders.

"The old gentleman isn't rallying like he'd ought, 'pears so," the Sport said, in guarded tones, meant for the young man alone. "We'll have to tote him over to town, unless—I say, pardner!"

"Say it, then."

"You're a relative, I take it? Or am I wrong in thinking that way?"

"I'm his nephew, and act as his private secretary, as well. I was over in town last night, sent by him, on his private business," briefly spoke Innes, evidently deeming such an explanation fairly due, if only to fully clear his skirts of blame for this evil happening.

"I had an idea that way, although you and I haven't met quite as often as the rest. Somehow you were away when I happened this way."

"My time naturally belongs to my employer, sir," a bit stiffly uttered Innes, still searching for sign. "But you started to say—what?"

"That you'd better go across-lots to town and fetch medical aid here. Your uncle needs it, and you are the one best fitted—"

"Send another man, sir; I'm going to find and rescue my—look ye here, my friend," eyes lifting to meet those keen blue orbs. "This is hardly time or place in which to broach private matters, but you look like a clean white-man, and so—just this much, first."

"Miss Kirkwood is missing; no one seems to know just how or by just what means. But one thing is fairly certain; the devils who made this raid belong to the outfit known in these parts as the Strangers."

"It's mightily like their work, anyway."

"And since all this is their work, so must the rest of it be. While my—sir, Lorella Kirkwood has been my promised wife now for almost a year! How can I think of anything else so long as I feel she is in such evil clutches?"

"Your promised wife?"

"Yes; my plighted bride. We were to be married as soon as this expedition came to an end. And now—talk to me about running for the doctor while—I'm going to follow those devils, though their trail leads me straight through the hottest pits of Hades, sir!"

As though nothing more remained to be said, Ralph Innes turned away and hurried off along the dimly outlined trail which he felt fairly confident marked the retreat of the raiders.

Sparkler Steve stood motionless for a full minute, gazing after the private secretary as he trailed the Strangers, his own face unusually pale and hands clenched very tightly.

"My promised wife!"

How queerly those words rang through his busy brain the while!

And then the sound of slow, shuffling footfalls roused the Sparkler from his musings, and, turning swiftly, Starlight faced the Irish cook, one of whose bony fingers raised to cross a pair of wide lips, eyes winking rapidly as head nodded again and again.

"Whisht, sor!" muttered Barney O'Shea, catching a silver button on that short jacket of Spanish cut and fashion. "The two ears av him are two moiles long, an' sharper nor a cambric naadle, faith! Whisht, thin!"

"You mean—just what, Barney?"

"That yon' shmooth divil knows a mighty soight more than he cares to lit fall, jist now, be gonies!"

"What? You surely can't suspect Mr. Innes of being in cahoots with the Strangers, O'Shea?"

Instead of flatly avowing his belief, Barney shrugged shoulders in significant fashion, lips curling and nose twisting after a comical manner, had the one observer been free-minded enough to appreciate such a whimsical exhibition. Instead, Sparkler Steve persisted:

"What do you know? What do you suspect, even, O'Shea?"

"Nothing, sor. Maybe 'tis mesilf as draamed it ahl, 'thin! Yis, sor Oi draamed it; jist draamed it, begorra!"

"All right, and dream goes, for now. We'll look deeper into the matter later on, but for now our first duty is owing to Mr. Kirkwood. You know the way to town, or—hold on! Perkins!"

When that individual responded, Starlight dispatched him for medical aid, then set the others working at a litter to bear the old man to town.

CHAPTER V.

DRIFTING TO HIS DOOM.

Often smiles than frowns, laughter than weeping, as any one on friendly terms with bright-eyed Kittie Crooks might easily have assured you; but now the smiles were conspicuous for their absence, and tears did not seem so very far away whenever the mountain girl looked toward the low, self-made bed upon which the muscular figure of her father was then lying stretched.

As a rule, Kittie could tell the hour, if not the minute, marking the home-com-

ing of Nelson Crooks, be that early or late, after the going down of the daily sun; but the night last past was an exception, save that she knew his return must have been unusually late, or rather early in the morning.

The mountaineer was sleeping heavily, yet disturbed by dreams or premonitions of impending danger, since he now and then muttered a few words or disjointed sentences, telling of strife and deadly passions.

Then, too, his hard-lined face bore marks of violence, such as nothing save the clenched hand of anger could well produce; an ugly bruise and semi-circle of purple skin.

Kittie was busied with her household duties, though making hardly any sound while flitting to and fro. So quietly, indeed, that she could catch every stir and movement from yonder rude couch. And as often unwonted moisture would come to her bright black eyes, a quiver to her red lips, a little frown of daughterly anxiety.

And then, when Nelson Crooks spoke more clearly, letting fall husky words which went far toward convicting himself of lawless deeds, either as principal or as accomplice, Kittie dropped her broom, and clasping hands over her face (now wet with hot tears), sinking to her knees by that bed, bowing head to the faded cover as something of her misery found vent in trembling speech.

"Oh, Lord—dear, good, kind Lord! Don't let poor old daddy go so awfully far astray! Stop him while there is yet time, for he's all I have left, now, since mother died."

"Lord, please make him see how wicked those ugly men are, and turn him aside from them before he comes to still worse. He's not all bad, dear Lord. He's been a good, dear, kind old daddy to me, and now—save him for his little Kittie, please, oh, Lord!"

More she said in broken, husky tones, tears moistening the coverlet as she knelt beside her surely erring parent, now lying so still and motionless; much more; but no need to give a literal record here. Enough that it was the heartfelt prayer of a true-hearted and loving daughter to an all-ruling power.

Lifting her head after in part unloading her burdened spirit, the little mountain beauty—for Kittie Crooks was all of that—bent again to touch red lips lightly to that damp forehead, then once more set about her household duties.

After a bit Kittie took the wooden bucket from its three-cornered bench back of the door, noiselessly passing outside after a pail of water from the bubbling spring yonder at the base of the gray rock-pile.

Light though her footfalls surely were, ears were keen enough to catch them and mark their progress for a brief space; and then, when he knew Kittie had passed beyond seeing his movements, Nelson Crooks rose from his couch, shaking his rude garments into something like order as he stood there in the center of the room.

Stepping over to a wall, he bent head far enough to look at his reflection in a cracked mirror fastened against the whitewashed logs. He took note of bruise and discoloration, giving a wry grimace as he saw how plainly that must tell of ugly work. He clenched fist and struck at the marred visage, only checking blow in time to save the glass from utter annihilation.

"You ugly houn'-dog, you!" he muttered, huskily. "You hain't no man; you hain't even the counterfeit of a man! Ef ye was, would ye tote a eye like that, 'thout layin' him as gev it to ye toes-up to the daisies? Ef ye was, would ye 'low ary clean, honest, pure white-gal like Little Kit fer to bu'st the heart of her out over the likes o' ye? Would ye—an' I'm a howlin' liar from headwaters ef I do, eyther!"

Nelson Crooks turned away from the tell-tale glass, sweeping a hand over his

bearded visage to clear and calm it, for he caught the returning steps of his daughter just then.

He almost feared to meet those frank, loving eyes, and that self-consciousness helped tell Kittie the truth.

For a little she hesitated, fearing to say or do more; but then, as her father seemed quieter than usual, softened to a degree which lent hopes rather than brought fears, her daughterly love carried the day, and suddenly sinking to her knees by his chair, Kittie clasped waist with arms, speaking huskily, imploringly.

Just what words passed her lips the girl could hardly have told, if asked. She was pleading with father against himself. She was trying to waken his better nature, and—she succeeded!

For some minutes the mountaineer sat in motionless silence, muscular arms hanging by his side as though stricken with paralysis, head bowed until chin touched bosom, that ugly bruise showing plainer than ever in contrast with his unusually pale face.

It was a hard if silent struggle, but the love of father for an only child won the victory, and with an unusual moisture in his eyes Nelson Crooks lifted a hand to that curly head, speaking huskily:

"Thar, thar, Kit; you're takin' a powerful sight o' worry an' trouble over a wuthless cuss which hain't o' no manner o' use 'cept fer to—"

A pair of moist red lips cut that deprecatory speech short, then the girl stood beside him, an arm hugging his broad shoulders, rosy cheek touching his tangled hair as she spoke further:

"You sha'n't say that while I'm listening, daddy, dear."

"It's gospel truth, though, Kit."

"It is not. Or, if it *was* true, once, say that it shall never be true again, daddy, dear! You *will* say it, father? With the good Lord's help we'll not only say it, daddy, but make it come true!"

"Ef sayin' was doin'—"

"It's a beginning, daddy, and you're not Nelson Crooks if you ever take up a thing to leave it unfinished," swiftly cried Kittie, handling him as only she knew how. "Your lightest word goes, as all the world knows! And so—say it after me, daddy; say that from this day on you will begin a new life, turning aside from all those who—oh, father! Will you not promise me to do this?"

"Ef you only knowed what—"

"I know that you have been led astray, father, by wicked men who are not fit for a white man to associate with," passionately cried the girl. "The worst of them is Peter Peltz, who is—"

"Satan blister his hide!"

"Amen! If you only knew how—and I'll tell you, too!" with sudden resolution. "Would you like for me to couple with Peter Peltz, daddy?"

"That black-hearted devil? You? I'd kill you with my own han's, fust!" fiercely exploded the mountaineer.

"If not good enough for daughter, how can he be good enough for father? And he is—worse than you can think, daddy! He comes here so often when you are gone; I believe he watches for just that!"

"Kittie!"

"And only the other day he swore that—I told him I'd sooner match with Satan, daddy! He swore that I should marry him, or else you should pay the cost, and then—"

"He did? Pete Peltz?" hoarsely cried Crooks, as he rose from his seat in spite of those clinging arms. "Marry *you*? That stranglin', murderin' houn'-dog? Augh-gh-h! I'll smash the very life out o' him like I mought a crazy wolf which hed—I'll bloody murder him, I tell ye, Kit!"

But Kittie clung to her infuriated parent, begging and pleading, soothing his mad passions as only she knew how, never giving over until the victory was fairly won.

And so, as the forenoon wore slowly away, daughterly love prevailed, and the

repentant mountaineer finally promised Kittie to break away from his evil associations as quickly as possible.

Possibly the girl might not have been so insistent had she fully realized what those associations were, or what great peril might attach to such an action as this. She knew that rumor made Peter Peltz a criminal, although as yet no open charges had been brought against that man of the mountains. She was ready to believe all manner of evil against the ruffian, because he had given her ample cause for dislike, if not actual hatred.

She knew that her father was wont to spend hours, both of night and of daylight, with Peter Peltz and other shady associates, yet she never looked upon him as an actual wrong-doer—only feared lest he might in time be led further astray by those knaves.

So it was that Nelson Crooks calmed and reassured Kittie without actually confessing his evil deeds. He meant all he promised her, too, though no man living could more thoroughly appreciate the peril which would menace him when such reformation should become known to his past comrades.

Nelson Crooks lounged around their mountain shack for the greater portion of that day, now chatting with light-hearted Kittie, now brooding by himself, letting thoughts and fancies find full sway.

And then when the afternoon faded into evening and an early supper was dispatched, he lit his pipe and slouched off in the direction of town, having bethought himself of sundry trifles which were needed in their household economy.

Kittie was something loth to see him go, but feared to object, lest that seem a lack of faith in his recent pledges; and so, knowing that he had taken the first step along a dangerous trail, but hardly realizing how surely he was drifting to his doom, Nelson Crooks picked his way across to Salvation City.

Once within those rudely built-up limits, the mountaineer found no lack of interest, and almost without the waste of a single breath learned at least a portion of what had drawn him thither.

For to Salvation City Martin Kirkwood had been conveyed by the Sparkler Sport and his allies, met part way by a man of medicine picked up by Nat Perkins. And after a brief investigation the millionaire was pronounced in a fair way to recovery, his skull having received no material injury from that dastard blow which laid him out the night before.

Nelson Crooks asked a few guarded questions after hearing so much, learning that Kirkwood was still in town, and that nothing further had been heard of the missing brother and sister. Learned, too, that the outrage was laid at the door of the Silver Slope Stranglers, as might have been expected after Martin Kirkwood's experience with the noose.

Later on in the night Crooks drifted apart from his fellows, only giving vent to his real sentiments when in a fairly secluded portion of the town, where none might hear or take inconvenient notes.

"He cheated the rope, then!" he muttered, lifting hat and tossing back his tangled locks for the cool air of night to play through. "Thank heaven for so much, anyway! And now—shell I?"

He stood in doubt, longing yet fearing. In his ears that broken prayer by the lips of his little girl still seemed to echo.

Should he prove himself a man, now? Should he make good the pledge given Kittie that day?

"Shell I blow the gaff? Shell I tell the hull durn story? What'd come of it ef I was to—do jest that?" he muttered, wrestling with right and wrong there in the mingling moonlight and shadow, all unconscious how near grim death was creeping his way.

Actually, too! Stealing on velvet-feet through those shadows, hands gripping weapons which fairly thirsted for this man's life. And then—

A swift leap which covered the little

remaining distance; a vicious stroke which felled Nelson Crooks like one smitten by lightning; and an instant later the brief gleam of an ugly blade as it rose and fell!

CHAPTER VI.

A WARNING FROM JACK KETCH.

Salvation City was hardly as saintly as its title might imply in other regions, yet it had in goodly part outgrown the "wild and woolly" stage of existence.

True, it owned a fair proportion of "bad citizens," had its share of "ructions" at odd intervals, with a growing reputation for irregular necktie parties which were not even to be attributed to Judge Lynch and his wayside court.

And so, though the hour was growing rather late for all reputable denizens whose regular business flourished under the rays of the diurnal sun, the city was startled in no small degree by the swift-echoing fusillade which announced a certain grim discovery.

A prostrate figure lying with limbs outflung and breast clotted by purple blood. A tall, long-haired man standing near by, revolver turned toward the starlit heavens and vomiting forth fire and lead as nervous forefinger worked the double-action.

Only a short distance off stood another couple of men, startled by both discovery and abrupt alarm.

A lonely portion of the town, but quickly becoming one of the most populous as shouts and cries followed that brisk fusillade, guiding one and all to the scene of excitement.

"What is it? Who is it? How came he so?"

In swift succession came the eager queries as men flocked around that center, eager to see and be heard, yet still finding time to listen to the explanations given by those who had been first to discover that victim of the night.

"We was jest moggin' 'long this yer way," splutteringly explained one of the trio to nobody in particular and everybody in general, "when Pete he ketched a sort o' glimp' which som'way didn't seem like it orter be jest so. An' then—quit yer blame' scrowdgin' or I'll—hel-low, Sparkler!"

"That's all right, Johnny," cut in Steve Starlight, as he brushed past, to bend for a moment over the body, then, giving a sharp cry as he drew back to flash a keen glance around that gathering crowd. "It's Nels' Crooks, and—who was first to find the poor devil?"

"Waal, sir, I reckon I was," avowed a tall, hairy fellow, coming more to the front.

"And you are—"

"Peter Peltz I'm called by them that know me best, but names don't cut any figure right now. I was first to see him; we were coming this way, heading for home. I saw something—couldn't say just what it was *then*, but something made me step over here, and then—well, I just woke up the town the quickest way I knew how, sir."

There was no fault to be found with that explanation, particularly as two other men were both ready and eager to back up his words.

Until now no actual examination of the supposed corpse had been made, further than to identify it with Nelson Crooks, but now came Dr. Frank Potter, who had scarcely knelt beside the blood-covered body ere he gave a short exclamation, followed by the startling words:

"He's not dead—yet! Fetch a plank, or door, some of you loafers, so we can get him to a fit place for working. Live-ly, now!"

Sparkler Sport heard Peter Peltz catch breath sharply as the man of medicines made his curt assertion, and as he saw how those hairy hands turned to knotted fists, an ugly suspicion found birth in his busy brain.

"You'll bear watching, my pretty fel-

low!" was his inward comment, but no word crossed his lips just then.

Dr. Potter knew his business as well as the best, and worked with cool swiftness, which right speedily produced a favorable result.

The wounded mountaineer gave a shiver, a few spasmodic movements, a low, rattling groan; then his eyes opened part way and his head was lifted far enough for a half-blind glance around him.

"Easy, my good man," kindly warned the physician, "slipping a hand under the arched neck to help support the heavy head. 'You're doing finely, but don't try to overdo it at first.'"

"I don't—that devil from—oh!"

"Who hurt you, Crooks?" asked Potter, deeming it no harm to make the most of that awakening. "How came you this way, my man?"

"That devil—I wasn't thinking—I saw him like—"

Again the mountaineer lifted head to look around, and as the crowd shifted a bit, the bright moonlight fell athwart a certain evil-eyed visage which Crooks instantly recognized.

With a spasmodic effort he rose to a sitting posture, although the dangerous exertion caused the blood to flow more freely from his cut chest. He gave a hoarse, hardly articulate cry, as he did so reaching forth a trembling hand to point at—

"Peter Peltz—curse you!" Crooks cried with a terrible effort. "Murder—bloody murder! I saw you—don't let him—he killed me!"

Those touching elbows with the man indicated thus fell hastily away, some with low cries of horror, others mechanically grasping butt of pistol or hilt of knife, but never a one among them all showing any inclination to defend or to stand up for the accused.

Peter Peltz showed his wolfish teeth in a half-snarl, but lifted his empty hands to clearer view as though feeling the need of a flag of truce. Then he spoke in his own defense, harshly enough:

"He's clear loony, men. I can prove I never touched him at all."

"Devil—lie!" again panted the wounded mountaineer. "He did—I know—strangler—curse him!"

Then Nelson Crooks fell back, utterly exhausted by those fierce moments, and Dr. Potter cried out in stern tones:

"Fall back, ye idiots! No more of this unless you're bent on murdering this poor devil. And—this way with your door, gentlemen!"

Volunteers were hurrying back with the rude litter at first proposed, and almost mechanically the crowd parted for their admission.

Dr. Potter directed matters, Crooks lying as one surely dead by now. The mountaineer was raised from the blood-stained ground and gently placed upon the door, which was then lifted by strong and willing hands, to be borne away in accordance with the doctor's wishes.

The Sparkler Sport took time to whisper a few words to Dr. Potter, who nodded both comprehension and acquiescence; then the seeming corpse was hurried away toward the main hotel of Salvation Camp, the Midway.

Starlight had barely whispered those few words when he felt a firm grip on an arm, and turned head to recognize dark-browed Peter Peltz, who spoke with surly vigor:

"You heard what that poor fool said, sir?"

"Crooks, you mean?"

"Yes. Of course he didn't know just what he *did* say, but maybe some of these pretty ducks might get to brooding over the fool words, and try to hatch a sensation out of it. So—you're a man. I'm another!"

"Well, what else?"

"Just this much, sir," with forced calmness, as he doffed hat to run curved fingers through his long locks while flashing a defiant look over that assembly. "I want you to try me out. I want

you to make me explain so everybody, fools as well as wise men, may know how mighty little chance there was for me to play Nels Crooks such dirt, even if I had wanted to, ever so bad."

"All right, Peter; say your say and get it over with."

"Let others speak, first. Call Johnny Beloit and Fred Flachs. I've been with them since noon, and they were in my company when I first glimpsed what proved to be poor Crooks. Now—speak up, lads!"

The two men came to the front, and, if their tales were true, fairly cleared Peter Peltz of that damning charge. He could not possibly have assaulted Nelson Crooks without their knowledge, since they had not parted company for even a minute since shortly after the noon-hour.

"That lets you out, then," quietly decided Starlight, as the accused once more appealed to him for judgment. "All the same, if I were you I'd hold myself well within sight and reach in case Crooks should come again when he's in better fettle."

With these words by way of friendly advice, Sparkler turned away, hurrying over to Hotel Midway, whither he knew the injured mountaineer had been taken, and under whose roof Martin Kirkwood had likewise found temporary shelter.

That whisper guided matters thus far, and, true to his expectations, the Starlight Sport found Crooks located in his own chamber, where Dr. Potter met him with hand raised in warning.

"Sh! I was just going to send for you, Sport," was his whispered greeting. "I need just such a man when it comes to patching up this poor devil, you see."

"Is there any hope for him, do you reckon?" softly breathed Starlight, looking toward the motionless shape stretched upon his bed.

"Of course, since he's still alive. But I wanted you for something more than that, too," added the man of medicine, as he noiselessly closed the chamber door, then slipping a hand into his bosom while speaking further:

"I was with Mr. Kirkwood when the alarm broke forth, and—"

"He's no worse, surely?" cut in the Sport, with strong interest.

"No; better, if anything. He was sleeping soundly, just then, but—do you see this bit of paper?" at the same time drawing forth his hand and holding up a discolored sheet of note-sized paper.

"What is it?"

"I'll show you in a moment. I went in yonder to see how Kirkwood was flourishing, and first-off I saw this; pinneefast to his breast!"

"What! Surely not—from whom?"

"Jack Ketch, or the signature lies, with a half-laugh as he passed the paper over to that eager clutch. "Short, if not exactly sweet."

And so Starlight could see for himself. Neither date nor address, but merely the brutally blunt warning—thus:

"Hold your hand. Wait for a word of direction from the Strangers, or both of your kids shall perish like dogs! Neglect this fair warning and pay full penalty, else my name is not

"JACK KETCH."

CHAPTER VII.

THE SPARKLER SPORT IMPATIENT.

Dr. Potter looked on quietly while Starlight was reading the communication, not once but twice at least.

"Is it a hoax, or pure business, do you think?"

"It reads mighty business-like, anyway," admitted the Sport mechanically refolding the paper, as before. "And you found it—where?"

"Pinned upon Mr. Kirkwood's breast, as he lay sleeping. As for just how it came there, don't ask me."

"Placed there by some one who took advantage of the alarm raised over poor Crooks, no doubt," suggested the Spark-

ler, brows knitted and eyes those of a man who was thinking deeply.

"Not exactly. I found the message before the shooting. I said as much, if you remember."

"That makes it look like a gray horse of a different color."

"As how?"

"Well, where general attention was turned elsewhere, 'twould be no very difficult or dangerous task for a cool-headed knave to make such a deposit; but before—that's different!"

"'Twas done, all the same."

"And now the next thing is—something else! Does Kirkwood know of this warning?"

"I don't think he does. He was still under the influence of the opiate I administered, although its effect was wearing away. If he had known of the note, would he have left it there?"

"Hardly."

Just then a stir and a husky groan from the bed, and the two men turned quickly in that direction, Dr. Potter saying, lowly:

"Poor devil! He's caught it hard and heavily."

"Not past getting over it, though, doctor?"

"Well, that depends on more than my say-so," frankly admitted the man of medicine. "While breath lasts there's at least a fighting chance for recovery, and this may be one of those modern miracles. Still—"

"You think the chances are against him?"

"Decidedly, from what I have seen. After a more thorough inspection I can tell better. You will lend a hand, Starlight?"

"Two of them, doctor. Just tell me what to do and how to do it."

Together they cared for the wounded mountaineer as best they were able, cleansing and bandaging his wounds, both looking grave enough when they came to inspect the ugly gash in the bosom, where a keen blade had been driven.

So far as could be ascertained just then no fracture of the skull obtained, although the torn and contused scalp told of an awfully brutal blow, dealt by some powerful arm and heavy weapon.

"You haven't given him any drug, have you, doctor?" Starlight asked, in an aside, during a pause in their labors.

"No. Why?"

"Thought he looked and breathed that way; sort of stupid like."

"From the blow he caught on his head. I'll feel like giving thanks if it doesn't turn worse before it grows better, too."

"Concussion, is it?"

"We'll know if it comes to that. Until then, we'll hope for better results."

The physician resumed his labors, and through it all Nelson Crooks showed scant evidence of torture, although he surely was not entirely lost to consciousness.

When the work was completed, and the last bandage neatly secured, Starlight attempted to question the invalid, unable longer to hold his curiosity in check.

"Careful!" warned Dr. Potter, gripping an arm and drawing his aid slightly away from the patient.

"But, man dear," expostulated the Sparkler, "he surely can tell me what I wish to know? 'Twill benefit himself quite as much as anybody else, don't you know?"

"I know that he's in no fit condition for chattering, just now, even granting that you could rouse him up to a full comprehension."

"Devil—I saw—he's a Strangler!"

Only the keenest of ears and quickest of comprehensions could have made aught intelligible out of that huskily uttered sentence, that came with a gasp and a shiver; but the Sparkler Sport was peculiarly interested in learning just how and why this deadly assault had been made, and he caught at the chance.

"Who hurt you, Crooks?" he asked, making each word very clear and distinct. "Was it Peter Poltz?"

"Devil—I thought—yes, Kittie! I'll never—swear off!"

"Why did Pete Poltz hurt you, Crooks?" persisted Starlight; but no response was given, and after a slow, heavy sigh the wounded mountaineer seemed to sink back into slumber; or, was it stupor?

"No more, just now," whispered the doctor, gripping an arm as the Sport seemed about gently to shake the prostrate figure. "The poor fellow's chances are slender enough at best. Don't make them even less worth counting."

Starlight made an impatient gesture, even as he yielded to that firm grasp.

"If you only knew how much he might tell, if he only would! You heard what he said about the Strangers?"

"I know. Still, I can't stand by and see one of my patients robbed of his slight chance for life. You know that, friend? When he rallies from the shock I'll not mind so much."

"But, what if he never rallies, as you call it?"

"Then no blame to ourselves!" came the retort. "He is a human being, like yourself, Starlight. He has a daughter, too, who would grieve as sorely for his loss as any other child might for an only parent."

"I know all that," admitted the Sport, still looking longingly at that pale face, turned so haggard during the last hour or two.

"Then live up to your knowledge, man. Give him all the chance there may be left, and if he should not pull through, one thing: you'll have so much the less to breed ugly thoughts in the dark, hereafter. If you couldn't save, at least you didn't help him across the Great Divide."

The Sparkler drew a long breath, letting his fingers unlock as his gaze came away from the wounded mountaineer to meet those cool eyes.

"I know you are right, doctor, still—tell me, honest: do you think he's caught his last sickness?"

"Well, that's more than I care to state, off-hand, Starlight. I can safely say this much: If fatal, we will know it by day-dawn. If alive and unfevered then, I'll call his chances even at least."

"And if fatal?"

"He will be sensible toward the last, and I'll let you know."

"Too late to be of any use, though!"

"Not so. Unless his case proves the rare exception, there will be a period during which he can talk clearly and sensibly—much more so than you could hope for right now."

"And you'll be sure to let me know?"

"Yes. Now, better go look after Mr. Kirkwood. He's doubtless awake ere this, and may be growing too impatient for his own good. That message means business, unless it's a flat sell; don't you think?"

The Sport nodded assent, giving that pale face a further wistful look before turning to leave the chamber.

Nelson Crooks looked far more like a corpse than one with a long lease of life before him, lying on the broad of his back, breathing so faintly that his chest could scarcely be seen to stir.

With gentle force Dr. Potter crowded the Sport across the threshold and closed the door behind him.

Thus dismissed, Starlight followed the hint given him by the physician, passing over to the chamber which had been hastily arranged for the reception of the injured millionaire, and where Martin Kirkwood was now lying, perfectly conscious if not quite himself again.

He met the Sparkler with a flood of eager questions, rising up in bed and making as though he would fairly leave it; but Stephen promptly tabooed that action, pressing the old gentleman back upon his pillow, declaring that on no

other condition would he open his mouth to talk or to answer questions.

"I'm not an infant, sir!" protested Kirkwood, pettishly.

"Of course not, but you're far from being a well man, Mr. Kirkwood, and if you're to be of any service in this ugly matter—"

"It's that which forces me up, can't you see? Those devils—my little girl is—oh, why can't I be a man again!"

"You can best prove your manhood by patient waiting just now, sir," gravely urged the Sparkler, though his own eyes glowed and gleamed with fiercest impatience the while. "If everything is as it now seems—"

"My little girl! If you could only know—"

"It's for your daughter's sake, Mr. Kirkwood, that I am counseling patience," cut in the Sport. "Any hasty action now might make matters far worse for Miss Kirkwood; can't you see it, sir?"

"Those cursed Strangers!"

"Amen!"

"Oh, just to think—can't anything at all be done, then?" groaned the injured millionaire, great drops of cold sweat showing upon his temples as white, long-fingered hands clenched in almost impotent fury.

During this interval Sparkler Steve had been busily thinking, and now he produced that written message, briefly detailing how it had been found where so adroitly delivered.

Those hands trembled so violently that Kirkwood found it no easy matter to decipher those crisp sentences; but when he fairly took in its full purport, imprecations crossed his quivering lips, directed toward the graceless knave whose signature so brazenly stared him in the face from that bit of paper.

Starlight waited until the outburst ended, then gravely spoke again, at the same time securing the note and stowing it away in his bosom for future reference in case of need.

"This Jack Ketch, as he calls himself, is head and front of an evil gang which has cursed this region for more than a year past. He never balks at murder if that seems the shortest route to success, and so I am advising caution just now, you understand?"

"Then you really think he means—what do you think, sir?"

"In a moment, please. If only your son was involved, that would be different. He's a man, and able to play a man's part in a rush and hustle; but your daughter—that's different!"

"I, for one, knowing what this devilish gang of Strangers have already been guilty of, where far less wealth was at stake, fear to risk too sudden action, purely on her account."

"But we can't leave the poor child in the clutches of such demons?"

"No longer than we just have to, of course," reassured the Sport. "Past all doubting, it's a throw for big money, in the way of extorting ransom from your pocket."

"I'd gladly pay any sum in reason, if I could only be sure the demons would hold good faith in any such bargain."

"Of course. And that's another reason why I say, wait!"

"It's worse than death by torture even to think of waiting!"

"Better that than bring worse upon your daughter, though, Mr. Kirkwood. We'll surely hear something more from the gang. After that, we will know better how to act. Our first duty is owing to Miss Kirkwood. We'll save her, first, and then—"

"What?"

"Give Jack Ketch a dose of his own foul medicine!" fiercely asseverated the Sparkler, lifting a clenched hand on high.

"Hang him, do you mean?"

"Ay! Hang him higher than Haman of old!"

CHAPTER VIII.

BARNEY O'SHEA PLAYS DETECTIVE.

The Yankified Irish cook had cut a very slight figure in the case since reaching Salvation City, although there were enough of the citizens on the loose whose curiosity was warm enough to open their pockets to pay for sundry drinks in hopes of being rewarded by hearing still more facts concerning this latest sensation.

Thanks to this, then, Barney put in a very comfortable afternoon in spite of his cracked crown and rope-chafed neck.

Although he really had little of importance to tell, thanks to his sudden overthrow by the Strangers, O'Shea made the utmost of that little, nor hesitated long over tacking sundry fictions to the facts, rather than give back poor pay for good liquor.

Not that Barney really grew intoxicated. He had a marvelous capacity for hiding "wet goods" without "makin' a baaste av meself" which many an old soak might have envied. But as the day waned and evening came upon its heels, Barney certainly was "feeling mighty good" for an invalid who had been hanging over the grave so recently.

And, almost as a matter of course, Barney was among the eager crowd which hurried to the spot where poor Kittie's father was discovered by Peter Peltz in such sad case.

In place of being dulled or stupefied, Barney's wits seemed quickened and brighter than ever, just then; and when he heard Crooks mumble something about Strangers, and almost charge Peltz with being a member of that villainous gang, the keen instinct of a natural born detective appeared to animate the cook, and from that moment grim-browed Peter was a marked man.

After Crooks was lifted upon the door and carried away to the room hired by the Sparkler, curiosity naturally ran high among the citizens, many of them wondering whether or no this mightn't be in fact another daring outrage on the part of the Strangler Gang.

Peter Peltz laughed the idea to scorn, so far as himself was concerned, calling on his comrades to bear him out in his story.

That they did without the slightest hesitation, and though both men were something the worse for red liquor, neither was too "fuddled" to speak the truth as they knew it.

Barney O'Shea came to the front, just then, grinning affably in that frowning face as he scanned each lineament, then giving head a toss and hand a wave of scorn as he addressed the crowd in general:

"Faith, sors, it's intoirely out av the quistion, an' Barney O'Shea's the bye as tills ye that same, begorra! Wan o' thim strangler divils, is it? Augh-yaugh! G'wan, now! Am Oi wan o' thim same? Av he is, thin Oi am wan o' the bloody divils who b'ate in the hid av me loike—augh-yaugh! G'wan, now, wid ye!"

Peter Peltz let his hard-set jaws slacken pressure, forcing a sneer as he tipped head to one side and curved an open hand to the right.

"There you have it, gents. And I never paid a red cent for the davy, either. Nels Crooks meant well enough, no doubt, but he was clean off his base this time. Why would I hurt him, so?"

"As a common grudge betwixt mahn an' mahn Oi've niver a worrud to say," gravely rejoined the Irishman, hat on the back of his bandaged head, feet widely planted, one hand flitting his swallow-tails while its mate gesticulated with more or less grace.

"Take it the way o' that same, gintlemin, an' it's not foor me to say that this gintlemon w'u'dn't bate the divil out av the other gintlemon; but that this gintlemon is wan o' the stranglin' divils—g'wan wid ye, faith!"

"Wasn't it Barney O'Shea who was there, begobs? Wasn't it me me own self, that saane wan an' ah av thim, sure?"

An' this gintlemon—niver a bit av it, an' it's Barney O'Shea can make his Boible davy to that same, faith!"

Much more the Irishman had to say, tongue wagging as though oiled for the occasion; and while his assertion that he had taken particular note of every shape, had coolly scanned every face among the raiding outfit, was naturally accepted with a big grain of salt, his positive assurance that Peter Peltz was guiltless of acting in with the Strangers had a favorable effect on the crowd, so far as the black-browed mountaineer was concerned.

Naturally, too, Peltz felt kindly toward the volunteer friend who showed so much earnestness in his welfare; and before another hour had rolled along the corridor of time, a stranger gazing upon that particular couple would have marked them down as lifelong friends.

Peter Peltz had money, and was not backward about spending it. He seemed fond of an occasional glass, and Barney still had room in his system for a trifle further irrigation.

The newly-formed chums passed from place to place, dropping in at different saloons, putting a shingle or two on each house in passing.

A critical observer might have formed the idea that Peter was trying to make Barney "good and drunk," either for the purpose of more easily "shaking" the fellow, or else—could it be that he was trying to "pump" the Emerald-islander?

That shot strikes closer to the bull's-eye of truth, and while Peter was playing his part right well, so was Barney making the most of his opportunity, sticking close to his detective notion.

As a matter of course, then, neither schemer won much information or had a great deal of satisfaction out of their labors.

Still, so cunningly and cautiously did each one work that neither suspected a double game. If Peter Peltz had even the shadow of a doubt as to the perfect faith of the cook, that was banished later on in the night, when Barney O'Shea found another opportunity of standing up for his noble friend.

At one of the "all-night houses" into which the cronies dropped during their devious perambulations, a husky miner bluntly declared that he would far rather take the bare word of Nelson Crooks than the Bible-oath of Peter Peltz, so far as the Strangler hint went.

Peltz showed teeth at this, but before he could fairly take action, Barney leaped high in air, rattling his heels together and flitting coat-tails with nervous hand, alighting squarely between the men.

"Whirr-roo!" he cried, fiercely, as the miner involuntarily recoiled. "Me fri'nd is meself, so, an' black is the whoite av me two oyes av Barney O'Shea Iver swallows an insoolt loike that, faith! Whirr-roo! Oi am me fri'nd, an' me fri'nd is meself, an' the couple av us kin bate ahl bloody the fool' hid av anny dirty gossoon who don't know anny bitter nor to—whirr-roo!"

The miner recoiled, as stated, but that was through surprise rather than fear, and now his hand dropped toward a weapon, only to stop short as Peter Peltz cried out, harshly:

"Steady, you! I've got you lined, Matson, and I'll blow you through in a holy second unless—"

"One at a time, and you'll last longer," growled the miner. "I'll tend to you, Pete, after I've doped this wild Irishman, who is—"

"Whirr-roo!" fairly howled Barney again, cracking heels, and flitting tails once more, seemingly beside himself with battle fury. "Who's an Oirishmon, faith? Is it me, ye dirty scut av the gutther? Me? An' me wan o' the bluest av ahl the blue-bellied Yankees who kem over the salt wather wid Moses in the boolorushes, bedad! Augh-yaugh! Av Oi had the impy hid av the loikes av yees, sor, Oi'd go rint it out foor a drum to bate—loike

Oi'll bate that same impty goord—so Oi will, thin!"

And Barney seemed bent on putting his latest threat into actual execution then and there; but, amid the burst of laughter to which his whimsical denial gave birth, friends interfered and speedily patched up a peace, which was duly ratified across the bar.

Not long after this incident, and finding that nothing was to be extracted from the Irishman, who by this time plainly betrayed the result of his heavy potations, Peltz took his chance to "shake" Barney, then heading away from town at a rapid pace, which showed naught of intoxication on his part.

Little did the burly mountaineer dream that this move was exactly what O'Shea had planned for his taking, and Barney played his role to perfection.

After drinking with Tom Matson and all hands swearing eternal peace and amity, the new chums left that saloon, and, as they came into the cool, fresh air, Barney began to act and talk very drunkenly.

From fierce to maudlin, from war to love seemed but a single step; and ere long the cook was trying to embrace the mountaineer, huskily vowing that he must—

"Hoog an' kiss yees foor yer sisher, be gobs!"

Then when Peter repulsed him, Barney dropped down in a limp heap, sobbing and moaning as though his heart would break.

For some little time Peltz watched over Barney, and at last slyly searched his pockets, finding precious little to reward his efforts, however.

Then he arose erect, kicking that limp mass contemptuously as he muttered:

"Play me for a sucker, would ye, fool? Try to pump me? Bah! I'd slit your wizzen or let an eyelet through your dog's carcass if I thought it'd be worth the bother! As it is—good-night, pardner!"

With a sneering chuckle Peltz turned away, soon leaving the town behind him, heading as directly as might be for his lonely shanty far away in the hills, over yonder.

So confident was he that Barney had succumbed to drink, that he hardly cast a look rearward, and not one of those infrequent glances had aught to do with the Irishman.

Yet scarcely had Peter turned back ere Barney lifted head, waiting and watching until he felt it would be fairly safe to take up the trail.

"Play yees foor a sucker, is it, thin?" chucklingly mocked the amateur detective as he cautiously shadowed the Strangler. "Faith, thin, av Oi don't do that same, me jewel, 'twil be foor lack av toime an' opporthunity."

"Play yees foor a sucker, is it? Ah-ha! A sucker is moighty poor atin' av a body isn't in sore nade foor toothpicks; but, ahl the same, a sucker ye bees, an' me hook is fasht in the gills av ye, too!"

CHAPTER IX.

THE DOOM OF THE SLEEPER.

Wholly unsuspecting of that truth, Peter Peltz pursued his way through the night, taking the most direct route practicable for his lonely shack up among the foothills, now striding on in moody silence, then breaking into chuckle or even laugh, gesticulating wildly as he thought over past events.

"Would ye, ye white-livered whelp? Play double on your betters, is it? Sell out those who are worth ten millions the likes o' Nels Crooks? Lick the hand that feeds ye, then sneak off to bargain with the butcher for the lot? Ah-ha! 'twas devil's trickery, and now you've caught the devil's own medicine to pay for it, my beauty!"

Chuckling, like one overflowing with mirth, the shaggy mountaineer slackened

pace as he came upon a level moonlit space amidst those rugged surroundings.

He looked cautiously around on all sides, bending head to hear the better, but all that came through instinctive caution rather than a fear of human hound upon his hot scent.

Barney O'Shea crept nigh enough to note this, and to see what followed; not so much when put into words, yet amply sufficient to confirm his belief that to this wild-eyed knave poor Nelson Crooks in reality owed his recent misadventure.

Laughing anew, this grim actor walked slowly across that illuminated stretch, head erect and eyes gazing with mock reverence at the moon, now sinking low as the night drew on.

Swiftly changing identity, he gripped revolver in one hand and knife in the other, crouching low and stealing along with cat-like silence, to finally leap forward with savage ferocity, striking hard as he came.

Dropping to knees as though upon a senseless enemy, Peter Peltz shifted weapons to drive that long blade deep into the dry soil, laughing viciously as he then drew back, rising erect to speak once more:

"Swift payment for dirty doings, my pretty neighbor! Bear false witness against your bosom-comrades, eh? Swear that the Stranglers—pity 'twas not rope instead of steel, after all!"

Barney O'Shea shivered a bit as he looked and listened, one hand mechanically fumbling at the rusty old revolver which he had secreted upon his person before adopting the detective profession.

This bit of grim pantomime drove away such slight doubts as may have lingered in his mind, for now he felt fully convinced that to this villain poor Crooks owed his hurts.

"The rope is it, faith! Sure, thin, an' it's meself w'd be willin' to take a Boible-davy yere the dirty spalpeen was wid thim same aavil Stranglers the bitter black noight, begorra! An' av Oi don't—howld ahn, ye divil! Wait 'till Oim a-coomin', will yeas, thin?"

But, Peter Peltz neither saw nor heard, turning away from that improvised stage whereon the downfall of Nelson Crooks was pictured with rude detail, once more moved briskly away toward his mountain shack.

Barney O'Shea quickly took up the trail, but never before had he so fully realized the peril attending an expedition of this sort.

That brief-lived pantomime showed him only too clearly what might be expected from this ruffian in case a false step or too hasty action should warn him of unfriendly pursuit.

And so it came to pass that Barney fell a bit further to the rear as the night waned and that journey lengthened, although he still clung to a hope of solving at least a portion of the Strangler mystery through trailing this rascal down.

Not so very long after playing that little farce, Peter Peltz drew nigh the brawling mountain river which cut across his path, striking it at a known ford, although there was scarcely the semblance of a road, other than the slope which led down to the water's edge on either side of the stream.

There was no bridge, but none was needed even by those who journeyed afoot, since white stepping-stones showed their heads here and there, affording fair foothold for such as cared to cross over.

Peter Peltz started across, stopping short when near the centre of the ford, startled a bit by the heavy splash of beaver or otter as it dove affrightedly in the deep pool just below that ford.

As he looked, Peltz could see the widening ripples close to where the stream curved sharply around a shoulder of rock, and with the mental eye of one thoroughly familiar with every foot of the way, he could see in fancy that sleek head rising again when hidden from view of the intruder.

A memory which was to return to him ere so many hours; a memory which others might have cause for registering, too!

That pause was but brief, and, moving on, Peter Peltz was out of sight before Barney O'Shea came to the river-side.

There the amateur detective hesitated, scratching his head in doubt as he took note of the crossing, so clearly open to view from the other side!

"Augh-yaugh! Hev yeas gone ahn, ye bloody divil, or air yeas jist holdin' over thayer wid a goon in the two fisths av yeas, waitin' foor Barney O'Shea to pit his blissed noggin to the fore? Augh-yaugh! Bittier bad luck to the lave o' ye, annyhow!"

While Barney was debating with himself the wisdom of risking a shot from ambush, his human quarry was striding swiftly along, growing more eager the closer he drew to his lonely habitation.

Not that he had the slightest idea of what was actually awaiting his coming, but home was home, and after all he had been doing of late, the Strangler felt the need of a rest and quiet sleep.

Half an hour later he came in sight of his cabin, at comparatively close quarters, for its location had been made with an eye to seclusion.

He gave a start and low cry, for the glow of light showed plainly through the one small window, and that told him the shack must have had at least one visitor since his departure.

After wasting a few minutes in scouting about to make sure no cunning trap was laid for his undoing, Peltz crept silently up to that window, looking through the none too clean glass to see—

A stalwart, handsome fellow, squatting on a stool before a glowing fireplace, elbows on knees and head nodding sleepily the while.

The Strangler's lips shaped themselves as though to give a prolonged whistle, but no sound issued. Peter instantly recognized that sleeper; and, recognizing him, the grin of a veritable fiend curled those heavily bearded lips.

Satisfying himself that he had but one man to deal with, Peltz tried the door, and finding it unfastened, swung the barrier wide enough to admit of his bulky person.

As the door was pushed to behind him, it gave a sharp squeak, which startled the sleeper to his feet, right hand hastily jerking forth a revolver, while its mate brushed swiftly across those sleep-heavy eyes.

"Flag o' truce, pardner," called out the mountaineer, open hand to the front. "Ef a feller can't come into his own shack 'thout gittin' drilled with plum-bago, why's the wharfore—eh?"

"Eh? Oh! I didn't—beg your pardon, sir, I'm sure," hastily apologized the intruder, who was none other than Ralph Innes, cousin to the abducted pair, and private secretary to their father, his uncle, as well.

"Don't mention it, stranger," cordially cut in the cabin-owner, his face broadening in a laugh as that menacing weapon vanished from sight almost as swiftly as it had put in an appearance. "Room fer snoozin' comes foleable cheap up in these yer diggin's, an' ef ye want to—"

"Was I asleep? Well, I don't wonder, for I never felt so much in need of it as I do right now," candidly admitted the young man, with a half-forced laugh in turn.

"Thar's the bunk, stranger, an' yender's plenty o' extry kiver to keep the mornin' chill off. Jest bunk in an' never make no mo' bones over it: yes!"

Peter Peltz seemed hospitality itself, just then, and Ralph Innes never held the faintest suspicion of danger or of possible treachery.

Still, he shook his head in negation, then adding:

"This is your home, then sir?"
"Sech as ye find it, yes. I've bin over to Salvation, ye see. Don't make a n'int o' stayin' out so turrible late, mind ye,

stranger, but when thar's so mighty much talk about—*you* hed some intrust into the matter, I b'lieve?"

"The Kirkwood affair, you mean?"

"An' the Stranglers—jest so," with a confirmatory nod as he squatted before the glowing coals in the fireplace. "Seed you over to town. Sort o' kin to them folks, I've hear'n say. Nasty scrape, shore!"

"Which will be fitly avenged if mortal man can bring that to pass, too!" vehemently declared the private secretary, face flushed and eyes glowing. "I hoped to run 'em down, myself, but somehow I missed their trail 'way off yonder in the hills, and then—well, I tramped until I thought I must drop, when I happened to glimpse this house."

"Whar you're plum welcome, stranger. An' now—augh-gh-h!" with a prolonged yawn and great stretching of arms and legs. "Hardly wuth while fer to bunk in, a'ter all, is it? An' yit—blame my cats ef I don't feel as ef forty winks w'd be wuth—eh?"

Ralph Innes laughed briefly, yawning himself through contagion.

"I feel as though a dollar apiece for those forty winks would be a mighty cheap price, to tell the honest truth, stranger."

Peter Peltz again motioned toward his rude bunk, but again Ralph declined, having already given that place of rest a reluctant examination, which proved it only too well inhabited already.

"I wouldn't rob you, sir," he hastily protested. "If I might have a robe or so, just to lop down here in front of the fire—"

Peltz quickly supplied those modest wants, and with a sigh of sleepy satisfaction, Innes "lopped down" under a bearskin to almost immediate fall fast asleep.

On his part, Peltz made a show of "bunking in," but his eyes were never more free from slumber than when he lay covertly watching the victim beside his fireplace.

Never another stir or movement until the deep, regular breathing from that quarter told of genuine slumber; then the Strangler silently raised himself to a sitting posture, elbows on knees and chin supported by joined palms, staring luridly at yonder sleeper whose awful doom was surely if slowly being shaped in his evil brain, just then.

Bit by bit that strong face seemed transformed. No longer human, but that of one possessed of the devil.

Rising to his feet, the Strangler tiptoed over to where, in one corner, he found a length of rope which seemed exactly fitted to his purpose, and at touch of which that face turned even more diabolical in expression.

Foot by foot, almost inch by inch, the Strangler crept closer to his intended victim, lips moving as though in speech, but with no sounds passing through, eyes ablaze with a light which was scarcely human, hands clutching, fingers curving like talons of a bird of prey.

Ralph Innes lay quietly sleeping, the glow of dying embers throwing a fair light across his handsome face. Never a dream of his impending doom troubled the sleeper.

With marvelous skill the Strangler fell to work, crouching over his unconscious victim, in readiness to back up craft with brute force in case of need, supple fingers forming the noose with which he fully intended to strangle the life out of this doomed sleeper.

With marvelous skill the Strangler played his part, gently tickling the sleeper's neck until he moved uneasily, then deftly slipping one end of the pliant rope beneath his neck, to cautiously draw it further and further, until he could form a sure garrote! That done his entire demeanor changed again, and with a wild, snarling cry he jumped upon the chest of the sleeper, pulling savagely at each end of the rope!

CHAPTER X.

JACK KETCH AND HIS PARTNER.

That same night witnessed other events which call for more or less extended notice for a perfect comprehension of the plot of the Strangler Band.

After the temporary division of the lawless outfit, mainly in order to break their trail in case of pursuit being made before a warning note could check any such risky effort, the two captives were hurried on through the night, only resting when the chief of the raiders felt they were in reasonably safe quarters, even if not as yet at the regular rendezvous of the Silver Slope Strangers.

The day following that raid passed without event requiring particular notice, but with the descent of another night, Jack Ketch appeared to be in anything save an angelic temper.

Nor was that mood in any wise amended by the coming of a certain comrade in crime, fresh from Salvation City (as he vowed) with a budget of the latest news.

Later on that same evening, then, Jack Ketch was drawn a little apart from his fellows and the two human prizes, faced by a fellow spirit there in the dim light of stars and moon, both obscured by the foliage above the heads of the plotters.

"An infernal botch, just when I felt assured all was bound to work smoothly from start to finish!" Jack Ketch was saying, with savage emphasis.

"With so much at stake, you had no right to take anything for granted," quite as surlily declared his present companion. "I gave you every possible chance! I smoothed the way until I could have sworn none save fools or traitors could possibly have failed!"

"Careful, curse you!" viciously snarled Jack Ketch, hand on hilt of knife as he gave warning. "I'm not in the sweetest of tempers right now, and I'd just as soon slit up your ribs as—"

"Don't make a bad matter worse, Jack," interrupted his ally, speaking more placably as a matter of self-interest. "Of course I know *you* didn't play false, but still—"

"Show me who did, and I'll kill him or them by inches!"

"If I had that same knowledge, my friend, you'd never have the chance to punish the recreants," dryly averred his comrade. "But that some one or more of the outfit was playing false, is past all doubting."

"Unless—how was it the old man escaped strangling, did you say?"

"A stick was inside the noose, holding the rope far enough from his neck to leave breathing space."

"Queer—infernally queer! But—could it have happened so?"

"By accident, do you mean?"

"Yes."

"Only an idiot could think it that way, and I'm still with my head level on top."

"It hardly looks reasonable, for a fact."

"It doesn't begin to be reasonable, and so I say: Some one or more of your outfit played roots on us both! And now—who had hold of that part of the job?"

"Peltz. I'd as soon distrust myself as to suspect him. Not that he's an angel," with a short, hard chuckle. "In anything save roping off a lame duck, I wouldn't trust Peter further than a cripple in both arms could fling a prize-ox by the tail; but in strangling—he'd choke his own mother just for love of seeing her kick and turn black in the face!"

"Who helped him, then?"

"That I'm not so positive about. 'Twas none too light where the lads were working, and I had my arms full of—you know what!"

"The girl, of course?"

"Yes, but you've no cause for growing jealous, pardner. If I hugged her a bit, 'twas merely in the way of business. And—what comes next?"

"You've had later word from Salvation, you said?"

"Yes. The old man is getting well, they say. And swears to make a holy spectacle of every one of our blessed family. Ha! ha! ha!"

"It's catching before hanging, luckily," grimly commented the other knave, but without joining in that boisterous laugh.

"The seed of the tree which is to hold me by the neck has never matured, old fellow."

"Hope not; but life is mighty uncertain out here in this wooden country, and I'll not be sorry when I can get back to civilization once more."

"Bah! What's good enough for me, ought to be good enough for the next man. And *you*, old fellow, oughtn't to scorn the place where you're making more good money in a week than you could pile up in the East in a lifetime!"

"The game isn't won yet, remember."

"Just as good as, though."

"Unless the rascals who let Kirkwood slip should take a notion to sell us both out!"

"They'll never do that."

"So you say, but how long since you were just as confident that all would work to perfection, over yonder? And now—Martin Kirkwood all alive and red-hot for vengeance!"

"Was, you mean," coolly retorted Jack Ketch. "I'm open to lay odds that the old gent will be cool as a clam before you lay peepers on him again, and—"

"You mean to lay him out, all the same?"

"Well, that's for after consideration," diplomatically answered the Chief of the Strangers. "Of course, our bargain holds good, even if the old fellow did slip through the noose, but—"

"No names, man!" swiftly warned the other, hand flying forth to cross those lips in the darkness. "So far I've kept my secret, and I want it guarded even more carefully from now on. You understand?"

"That's all right, my friend. I never meant to call names, so don't you worry. Of course, the old bargain stands?"

"Why shouldn't it?"

"For no good reason that I can see. Let that flea stick by the wall, then. And now, what else?"

"That infernal Starlight! He's taken up this case, and if he sticks to it in the same humor he's opened with, it'll make a merry old dance all around."

"He's a nasty customer, or all looks lie," thoughtfully admitted the head Strangler. "I'd rather almost any other man in the West would chip in on the other side."

"A blue pill will lay him out just as quickly as any ordinary slouch, though, if rightly planted."

"Of course. I'm not taking water. I'd croak a round dozen of the same calibre for the pay I'm counting on getting out of this little jubilee. Only—"

"That's just it: *only*—you can't afford to take any long chances with a chief like the Sparkler. Wait for a fair chance to down him, then make your dose mighty certain and swift to act!"

"All right. I'll hold my end of the traces level, never you worry. See that you keep on playing your part as well, old man."

"Oh, I'll do that for my own sake," with a low chuckle.

"See that you do. Go back to Salvation, and pick up the thread right where you dropped it before this little boggle came into our skein. I reckon that can be straightened, though."

"It must be!"

"All right, and must be goes. Work under cover as much as possible, but spare no pains to find out just how the old man escaped the noose, and who turned the trick—provided it wasn't an accident, of course."

"Such accidents are mighty uncommon!"

"Still, I can't see how Pete Peltz was blinded like that."

"Are you so certain of his fidelity, then?"

"More so than I am of your own," came the answer, blunt as it was ready. "One of those helping him out with the rope must have played us dirt, if any one."

"Learn from Peltz just who were helping him, then, and the rest ought to be easy enough."

"I will. Now, one word more."

"Say it."

"Hold yourself to come or to go at my first call. I'll manage without you as long as I can, and the summons may never reach you. Still, if it should come, I'll need you mighty bad, and in a heap hurry, too!"

"All right. I'll remember. And if I should find out who played the little joker in this deal?"

"You surely know what to do with him?"

"Send him over the range?"

"Of course. There's one death due on this score, and if we can't do any better, we'll pay through Peter in place of by Paul!"

"So mote it be! And now, pardner, just what move comes next on our little checker-board?"

"Wait. Time enough for arranging all that. I'll make my good will known unto all concerned in fair time, be assured of that much."

"I might work to better advantage if you posted me in advance, though," came the half-impatient suggestion.

Jack Ketch made an off-hand gesture before replying:

"That's all right, I tell you, pardner. Word will strike you soon enough. Until then, just stick to the line already marked out for your dainty feet to travel. The less you stir around in this mix, the less risk you'll run of being smoked: see?"

"Of course, I'm not kicking on that score, but—"

"Don't kick, and your toes will feel all the more comfortable, old fellow. Just do your duty, and leave the rest to me. I've got it all on the simmer in my brain-pan, and 'twill make mighty sure medicine when the sign comes right. Now—so-long, pardner!"

With a curt response the other schemer turned away, speedily fading out of sight in those shadows.

Jack Ketch looked after his ally for a brief space, then turned and moved leisurely across to where his captives were in waiting.

CHAPTER XI.

IN THE CLUTCH OF THE STRANGLER.

Although located in the same direction, those captives were not in company now, nor had they been since the Strangler came to a permanent halt, for reasons which Jack Ketch evidently deemed all-sufficient.

Time and again Lorella Kirkwood had begged to see her brother, but as often she met with refusal, though assured that Allen was in good condition and faring to the full as well as herself.

Beyond this the poor girl could win nothing, and the uncertainty felt on his account added in no small measure to her mental torture throughout those long and trying hours.

If well, why deny them the privilege of companionship?

Apart from this unnecessary severity, Lorella had little to complain of, speaking from a prisoner's point of view. Food and drink had been supplied in abundance, of more than fair quality, while harsh words were few and far apart, and abuse was nil.

Still, the young woman showed the effects of her ordeal, and eyes were darkened rings with cheeks of less healthy hue than ordinary.

Apart from her anxiety concerning Allen, there was the terrible fate which had (as she believed) befallen her poor old father: death at the ruthless hands of these Strangers.

After seeing the last of his nameless ally, Jack Ketch moved more briskly, picking his way through the shadows to the spot where Allen Kirkwood was kept in waiting, a word or two fetching a couple of lusty knaves to his assistance.

And so, shortly afterward, Jack Ketch led the way over to where Lorella was sitting in bonds, the guards escorting another prisoner close at the heels of their masked leader.

That prisoner was Allen Kirkwood, pale-faced, wild-eyed, with his hair all rumpled and garments disordered, as though fresh from a desperate struggle against long odds.

He was free to walk, although strong bonds pinioned both arms behind his back, leaving him helpless to harm his enemies, or to assail them save with his tongue.

Just now the young man was proceeding quietly enough, but the instant he caught sight of his sister in bonds, Allen gave a low, hoarse cry, jerking away from the hands which tried to check him, flinging himself violently against the Strangler in front, knocking Jack Ketch aside like a man of straw, drawing oaths and curses from each one of the surprised trio.

"Stop him! Don't let—take him, ye hounds!" gasped the chief, seemingly with the breath nearly knocked out of his lungs by that sudden impact.

But instead of trying to make his escape by flight, Allen Kirkwood rushed across to where Lorella was striving to rise, her trembling lips pronouncing his name betwixt fear and joy and dread lest worse should follow this rash outbreak.

Allen stopped by the girl, facing his enemies as they came with a rush, face fairly livid, eyes ablaze, voice fiercely menacing.

"Back, ye curs! I'll die rather than—hands off, I say! Kill me if ye like, but my sister—back, you whelps of Satan!"

"Steady, lads!" cried Jack Ketch, just in time to keep his men from leaping upon the defiant captive. "He's all right, so far. He can't get away without we say as much, and so—go easy you, young man!"

"Give me a pistol and I'll fight the bunch of ye!" pantingly cried the young man, wrestling furiously with his bonds. "Give me a knife—a club—the use of my naked hands, even! Oh, you curs! If ever I—"

"You never will at this rate, young hot-head," crisply interrupted the Chief of the Strangers, standing at ease, feet wide apart and gloved hands lightly on hips. "The harder you kick the sharper will be your punishment, remember."

"Why wouldn't I kick when—look here, you scoundrel," by an evident effort calming his tones. "I don't give a curse for myself, but my sister—"

"No, no, both or neither!" cried Lorella, desperately.

"Quiet, child. And you, fellows, play any game you like with me, but let her go free. Say you will and I'll—"

"All right, my pretty fellow. That's about what I've brought you together for, don't you know?" cut in the head Strangler.

"You mean—what?"

"Business, with a great big B. Of course, you can both readily comprehend that we are not in this line purely through love of excitement. We hold that the world owes us all a living, and are willing to turn our hands to 'most any sort of a job. And so—it just happened like this, to begin with:

"Pretty much all the world has heard more or less of Martin Kirkwood, the banker, capitalist, financier, dealer in stocks and bonds and all the rest which goes to make up one of our marvelous money-kings of to-day.

"Although we poor devils live fairly outside of the world, as you may say, we've heard a goodly bit about the old gentleman and his money-making powers; and so, when the chance came in

our way, we naturally made the most of it. Understand?"

"I know that you brutally murdered our poor father, when—"

"Hold hard, pardner!" cut in Jack Ketch, flinging up a hand as he raised objection. "Talk straight if you chin at all. There was no killing done, and your old dad is now at Salvation City, very much alive indeed."

Lorella gave a choking cry, yet scarcely dared believe these glad tidings, while Allen seemed even less credulous.

"That's all right, though," assured Jack Ketch, airily. "You shall see and be satisfied for yourself, my dear friends. That is, provided you and I succeed in coming to amicable terms. See the point?"

"If father is really living—if he escaped your brutal hands, he will never rest until this vile outrage is punished as it deserves."

"I pity the pair o' you if he is foolish enough to make the attempt," came the swift retort. "But he'll never take such mighty long chances. For one thing, by this time he's had a note of warning from my hand, and will think many times before acting even once."

"You mean—what do you mean, you demon?"

"That there's too big a pile at stake for me to waste even a baby trump. We counted on making a rich haul over at your camp when we jumped the outfit. Never mind just how it came, but we had a hint that you toted along a power of cold cash."

"A lie, whoever said it. Why should we, when—"

"Never mind. We've found out as much for ourselves, and so have made an important change in the peppergram; like this:

"First, it's been more than two months since we've made any strike worth mentioning, and the boys are growling about the lack of small change for their daily amusements. This show has proved a fizzle, financially speaking.

"We are out for the dust, of course. And if we can't get it by hook, then we'll try a crook instead. Hence, my dear brother in bonds, we're going to give you a show for your own white ally, by using you as a stalking-horse against the old gentleman. Understand?"

"Put it plainer if you know how."

"All right, and plainer goes. We've figured the whole situation up, and this is the sum total. It's worth just twenty-five thousand dollars to us, counting blasted hopes, night work, strain on conscience and all the other little items which go to make up a whole."

"Twenty-five—are you crazy, man?"

"Well, scarcely. That pile may look a mountain in eyes like ours, but it's the merest molehill for Martin Kirkwood's peepers, and he'll be overjoyed to get his two blessed kids back at the price. Don't you think as much, my dear friends?"

"He'll pay you in lead, not in gold, curse you!"

"He'll have a double funeral on his hands if he plays so foolish a card in our little game," came the easy retort. "I give him credit for better judgment than you seem willing to allow, Mr. Kirkwood. And so—I proceed.

"Twenty-five thousand in a lump sum, or, divided, fifteen thousand for this charming young lady, and a more modest ten for yourself, dear boy. Surely that is moderate enough to please any reasonable party?"

"I'll never consent to—I'd pay you in cold steel and hot lead, you infernal villain!"

"You're foolish, dear boy. Just now you are bankrupt. You couldn't pay for a bristle if an entire porker was selling for ten a penny!"

"If I live long enough—"

"Which is heap-sight more than doubtful unless you change the tune you're singing, dear fellow. Why mouth such far-off threats when you're im-

tent to help yourself, much less injure another and far better man?"

"Give me room to act and I'll show—"

"You are showing yourself past reason, fool!" with a fierce anger which formed a startling contrast with his moderate tone and manner. "Now look ye here, Allen Kirkwood: business is business, and just now I'm acting as its prophet.

"We've got you and your sister. We can dispose of you both pretty much as we see fit. Now, why can't you play half-way decent, and meet me on a common level?"

Allen laughed, shortly, turning partly around to more clearly show his hampered arms.

"An even footing, do you say? Give me the chance, then. I'm only one man against—how many?"

"Enough to back up my words by deeds, never you fear."

"Yet you are afraid to loose my hands! Oh, what wonderful—"

As though stung to the quick by sneering tone, Jack Ketch drew knife and making a swift motion, cut cleanly through those thongs, Allen Kirkwood giving a short, sharp cry as he felt his arms drop free once more.

"If you make a silly use of the privilege, so much the worse for yourself," grimly warned the Chief of the Strangers, putting up his blade and speaking on in clear, crisp tones:

"That common level lays pretty much like this. We've got the goods, and Martin Kirkwood has the cash to pay for them. I've named our upset price, and now it's your turn to come out flat-footed.

"Will you help to a fair understanding, or must we make use of still more harsh methods?"

"I'll never consent to treat with such infernal villains as you have proved yourselves—never!"

"The more fool you for feeling that way," sternly retorted the man in mask. "We might come to an amicable understanding without wasting either time or temper, but since you can't see it in that light, we'll have to do the other thing."

"What do you mean by that?"

A brief pause, during which those hidden eyes seemed viewing face of sister as well as that of her brother; then Jack Ketch spoke again, in the same tones:

"Well, I reckon what I've got to say in such a case would sound just a bit better in male ears than those of a delicate girl, don't you know? So—come, young man: we'll take a bit of a walk."

Allen Kirkwood recoiled a trifle, then as swiftly rallied, clenched hand uplifting and voice sounding fiercely menacing as he burst into another flood of curses and threats, all leveled at the head of his arch-enemy.

For a brief space Jack Ketch stood irresolute, then stepped forward to smite those lips sharply with his gloved hand, leaping back the next instant with revolver flashing into view and flying to a level with the heart of the young man. And then he cried out, harshly:

"Steady, you young fool! Make another bad break and off comes the roof of your house in a holy hurry!"

CHAPTER XII.

PLAIN LANGUAGE FROM JACK KETCH.

Allen Kirkwood recoiled from that stroke, but then half-crouched as though to fling himself savagely at the throat of his masked enemy, all heedless of his own peril through so acting.

But Lorella cried out in swift affright, striving all she knew to rise and fling herself as a living shield upon the bosom of her too-rash brother.

"Allen—dear Allen! Don't—oh, sir, I beg of you not to—he knows not what he says, and never meant to—spare him, I beg of you!"

Jack Ketch showed no particular dis-

inclination for the encounter, possibly because he felt doubly armed in his forty-five and the handy proximity of his sturdy fellows, more than one of whom lingered within easy ear-shot of the trio.

Still, even the most reckless spend-thrift would scarcely elect to use a ten-thousand-dollar target which a single shot might make worse than valueless, when another could be found to serve equally as well.

And so, lowering his weapon with a change of tone to match, he spoke again:

"That's good advice, and I'm only too willing to act upon it, if only your brother will—come, Kirkwood: play the man, can't you?"

Allen gave a sulky growl instead of speaking, but his figure slowly rose erect and his clenched hands relaxed.

Jack Ketch nodded toward Lorella, laughing softly the while.

"Your pretty head is the wisest one of the pair, by far, Miss Kirkwood, and I reckon it'd be both time and patience saved to negotiate with you; but I never change the run of the cards when once set going, and so I repeat: Come with me, Mr. Kirkwood, please."

"And if I don't choose?"

"You'll come, all the same," was the cold retort, as once more the revolver came into play. "Come with me! Come alive and sound, or come a cripple!"

If ever mortal man meant pure business, Jack Ketch was the individual just then and there, else all signs lie.

So Lorella Kirkwood instinctively felt, and seeing her stubborn brother hesitate, she cried out, agitatedly:

"Go Allen; go with him and try—for my sake, if not for your own, dear brother!"

A brief suspense, then Kirkwood yielded to the inevitable, growling forth a sulky submission, which in itself was a threat of no mean caliber.

Jack Ketch seemed willing enough to overlook any such trifle, and with a low, not unmusical laugh he again put up his revolver, turning away from that spot while saying:

"After me is good manners, my dear fellow. Come, please; I reckon you and I can finish our little confab better over this way."

Sulkily enough Allen Kirkwood complied, his movements seeming more hang-dog by far than those of yonder arch-schemer.

Evidently the young man would be an ugly customer with half a show for making a fight; but that show was lacking here, as even a gleam of reason must have told him.

Jack Ketch alone might have been disposed of, for Allen was a well-built fellow, and lacked no training as a fair athlete; but he could see at least half a score armed knaves hanging around, some within easy ear-shot and all inside of eye-range.

Jack Ketch never took the trouble to glance over-shoulder to see how closely his prisoner was following instructions, but neither did he seem inclined to make a long walk of it, halting again while visible to Lorella as she sat helplessly in bonds at the foot of yonder big tree.

Allen Kirkwood was close at hand when the Chief of the Strangers faced about, but he made no attempt to "cut up rusty," evidently having at length realized how worse than useless it was to kick against the pricks where such odds were arrayed against him.

"So far, so good, old fellow," cried the Strangler with hearty good-will in his tones, whatever might be in his heart just then.

"Well, I'm here. What is it? Cut it as short as you know how," surlily muttered the captive, scowling from beneath bent brows at the armed men who watched and listened so closely.

Only for them!

Jack Ketch laughed mockingly as he, too, swept a look around.

"Pity, isn't it?" he said, apparently able to read those thoughts at will.

"Only for those tough nuts, what a glorious picnic you would have; eh, my hearty?"

"You've said it."

"And I believe it—just as little as you do," mocked the Chief of the Strangers. "You're a cur at heart, Allen Kirkwood, in spite of all your mighty growl and bluster. If we were alone here, merely man to man—"

"I'd tear your throat wide and then choke it up with your palpitating heart, curses cover you from crown to sole!"

So fiercely came this threat that several of the Strangers instinctively started that way, only to be checked the next instant by an imperative gesture from their leader, who added the words:

"Keep your distance, lads. This is barking, not biting. And, even so, I reckon my hand is able to guard my head. So—thanks, and fall back, my pretty lads!"

"You owe 'em thanks, right enough," growlingly said Kirkwood. "But the day may come—it *shall* come!—when I can settle accounts with you alone. And then—man nor devil can save you from paying full penalty!"

"That's all right, my hearty, if you can only make it come right. I'm not losing any flesh through worrying over the future, though. And if you are not all fool, you'll swallow the rest of your curses and threats until your own neck is fairly out of the noose."

"This is my little picnic, and you've got to take just what portion is measured forth, under penalty. And that penalty is—later on!"

"I reckon you've figured out pretty correctly just what manner of sports we are, by now, but it'll do no particular harm to cast a bit more light upon the subject."

"We heard—never mind just how, or through what source—"

"I know; that cur, Ralph Innes!" fiercely cried Kirkwood, his tones loud enough to reach the outlaws, as well as his sister in bonds.

"Bah! You're wild, man," mockingly declared Jack Ketch. "But what's the use? As well him as any other, so let it go at that if you're feeling any the better over it."

"I know what I know," with dogged emphasis.

"Which is a heap-sight less than you *think* you know, simmered down to naked facts," chuckled the Chief of the Strangers. "All right. I don't kick. Now, open your ears, my boy."

"However the word came our way. We expected to rake in a mighty fat boodle over at your camp, which will account for our disappointment when we failed. And failing—well, that led on to a complete change of plans, as I'm trying to make you understand."

"Now, we want money. Martin Kirkwood has got it, in great gobs. He shall pay out a fair portion of that wealth by way of ransom, or else he will be under the painful necessity of starting afresh in the family business. Understand?"

Allen Kirkwood shrugged shoulders, but made no more definite reply.

"All right. Your voice is hardly honey-sweet, so *simmer* go for their face value. As I hinted, it comes to just this: Ransom, or death! Money, or a double funeral! And when all this is fairly presented to the old gentleman, as I mean it shall be, I reckon there will be a speedy understanding arrived at; don't you think, pardner?"

"If he should refuse?"

"What's the *u* *ing* time over an impossibility, man?"

"If he should decline to meet your terms?" persisted Kirkwood.

"Well, granting that the old man would be so crazy as all that comes to, *you* would be supplied with a more or less ornamental grave, while your sister would—"

"Careful, you cur!"

"While your sister would be given a

—husband," coolly spoke the Chief of the Strangers.

"You merciless demon!"

"With or without a regularly ordained priest to bless that union," insolently went on Jack Ketch; heedless of the torture he might thus be inflicting.

"Honest, old man, I'm dead gone on her shape already, and if my pocket alone was concerned, I'd jump at the chance of making such a ten-strike!"

"Careful, you! Don't go *too* far, you imp of hades!"

"All right, dear boy. As I was saying, of course I mean to stick by my word, having once pledged it. Twenty-five thousand dollars buys the pair of you, and not one red cent less. Fifteen takes the girl alone, but I'll not sell *you* without *her* to keep you company, understand?"

"Go on. Finish, now you've begun. After that—go on, curse you!"

"Thank you for nothing, dear boy. Well, my terms have been named. If my offer is met on the square, well and good; we finger the simoleons, while Kirkwood takes his pair of kids. If not: if father is as bull-headed as his precious son appears to be, then you'd ought to be smart enough to cipher out the rest of it, from what I've said already."

"And I'd see you sunk to the bottom of the hottest pit in Tophet first, only for—"

"Only for the dainty darling? Just so," coolly interrupted Jack Ketch, like a man who feels he holds the whole game securely in his own hands.

"After that exchange—"

"Will come something else, as a matter of course. Can't you let one minute go to waste without spitting out snarl or growl, pardner? A sweet old brother-in-law you would make, I don't think! And yet—blamed if I don't think I'd be willing to take the bitter for the sweet! And—lookout, you fool!"

For Allen Kirkwood was leaping straight at his throat, seemingly bent on avenging all wrongs and insults by death itself.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE PRICE OF LIBERTY.

If looks and actions go for aught, Allen Kirkwood meant death to the Strangler Chief then and there; but the fates had not so willed.

Jack Ketch scarcely took the trouble to recoil or to move aside, for his men were on the keen alert, and swifter even than were the movements of Allen Kirkwood, those satellites took action.

A slip-noose was flung over the prisoner's head, jerking him back and for the moment rendering him utterly helpless.

Ere he could rally even in part, strong arms were flung about his body, another rope was passed over both arms and tightly twisted in place, pinioning those members past making further trouble.

Jack Ketch stood laughing just beyond reach of the now impotent man, evidently hugely enjoying the present situation, if only as a fair specimen of his power.

"Can't you ever get a fair notion through that thick pate of yours without having it driven in with a maul? Here I'm treating you whiter than snow, and liberal no end, while you—ugh! you make me weary, pardner!"

"I'll tear your black heart out to feed to the dogs!" raged Kirkwood, but impotently so far as doing any further harm was concerned, so thoroughly helpless was he in grip of rope and clutch of men.

"Come, come, that's even worse than nonsense, dear son. You couldn't do that if let, and we wouldn't let you if you could. So—simmer down and play half-white, even if you're not. Else—well, there's a limit to all things sublunary, and even my stock of patience can't be made to cover very much more folly."

"Shell we give him the grand dump, boss?" asked one of the lusty knaves who had chipped in so opportunely.

"No. I reckon he's beginning to see things as they are, not as he wishes they might be. So—cast off, my gallant lady-bucks! And you, Mr. Kirkwood, please bear in mind that another such foolish break will just as certainly end in your getting salivated—for keeps!"

"I'd rather be killed outright than—"

"Well, you shall have your wish in that respect after another such crazy break," crisply cut in the Chief of the Stranglers, with eyes glowing luridly through the holes in his dark face-covering. "That's fair warning, and one which I'll never repeat, so take heed."

A wave of that gloved right hand caused the ropes to fall off and those who wielded them so deftly to draw back once more.

Allen Kirkwood gave himself a little shake, lifting arms as though to make sure he was entirely free from bonds; but then he stood in sullen silence, making no further effort for revenge.

"That begins to look a bit more like it," declared Jack Ketch with a nod of careless approval. "Oh, granted time and opportunity, my dear son, and I'd agree to turn you out even a bit more than half-way respectable: yes, I just would, now!"

"Don't rub it in too deep, you scoundrel," sternly warned the other at this, hands going behind his back, there to join fingers in tight grip as though by no less means could he resist the fierce temptation to again jump at that mocking demon.

"That's all right, too, my hearty. I'll play white as long as you refrain from playing the fool. There's nothing I want more than to make you see the one straight and easy path out of the tangle you've fallen into, and that trail opens up pretty much like this:

"Your governor has got dead loads of money. We hold money's worth in two pretty prize packages. A fair exchange is no robbery, is it? Good enough! That ought to be plain a-plenty for a blind man to read as he runs, and so—your arm, pardner."

"What now?"

"Well, where's the sense in making two bites to a cherry? Why tell a story twice, when once ought to suffice? And so—the maiden fair is straining her charming peepers, over yonder; let's go and in a measure relieve her awful suspense."

Still mocking, still stinging with every sentence, no matter how cunningly the point was veiled; but time had been given the young man for some sober reflection, and he knew that kicking against the pricks would only add to rather than lessen the trouble.

Jack Ketch ran a hand through the arm of his sullen captive, moving back toward the tree under which Lorella Kirkwood was waiting in such painful suspense, and neither his words nor his manner betrayed doubt as to the final outcome.

"Second thoughts are best, after all, Pretty-by-night, and so here we are, ready to take your charming self into the conference. A word from your red lips may save this rather headstrong brother of yours another awkward lesson, too!"

"If I can say or do anything to help—oh, Allen!"

"It's all right, Lorella. Wait. The day will come when—cut it as short as you know how, you scoundrel!"

"If my terms were half as long as my patience, Kirkwood, 'twould never be told through," significantly warned the man in mask. "As a matter of course, some little allowance must be made for a fellow in your present predicament, but—don't crowd that allowance too mighty far; don't do it, now!"

"For my sake, brother," hastily whispered Lorella, fearing still worse might follow. "Oh, Allen, dear; don't anger him so much that he may—be patient, dear, I beg of you!"

Again the young man seemed to crush

back his fierce temper by a stern effort, standing beside his sister with hands tight-clenched head drooping and brows corrugated.

"That's mighty good advice, and if a fool should neglect it—well, he'd deserve pretty much all that was measured forth to him," declared the Chief of the Stranglers with a nod of grim approval. "Now—business is business and empty chinchin never yet filled the market-basket."

"Briefly summed up, this is how the case stands at present: We've got something which Martin Kirkwood wants: he has a pile of what we lack: what's the matter with making an equitable swap?"

"Now, right here you can have my idea of the way out of this tangle."

"We'll hold fast to the more precious of those two packages, while sending the other back to the financier, both as sample of goods and bearer of our latest revised price-list."

"To make sure there is no error in the message, you, Miss Kirkwood, will write a fair statement to your more or less honored paternal progenitor, giving him to understand on just what terms the bargain may be consummated."

"Stop!" cried Allen, at this juncture.

"Well, what's the matter now?"

"You mean to send one of us to our father with a message?"

"That's what I said, yes."

"All right. Let my sister go, and then—"

"Oh, no!" interposed Jack Ketch, with a short laugh. "That would be playing the fool with a vengeance, now wouldn't it?"

"If you are acting in good faith—"

"That's all right, too. Good faith goes, but a pinch of common sense keeps it company, you want to bear in mind, my hearty."

"I don't—what are you trying to get through you, anyway?"

"Just this: that so long as we hold Miss Kirkwood fairly in our grip, we can expect something like fair dealing on the other side. With her let loose, and only you to play security—bah!"

"One so ready to suspect trickery in others is certainly brooding treachery himself!" retorted young Kirkwood, glowering again.

"That's all right, too. It's our choice, and the rest of you can only take what is offered, don't you see? And so—to resume!"

"Pretty-by-night, here, shall write a nice little note to the worthy papa, frankly stating just how the case now stands. She will tell the unvarnished truth, for, as a matter of course, I'll look over the note before 'tis dispatched to its destination."

"You will take that note, Mr. Kirkwood, and from what slight experience you have had since falling into the clutches of the Silver Slope Stranglers, I imagine you will have slight difficulty in making papa fairly comprehend the present situation."

"For instance: Should he find any serious difficulty in unlocking his treasure-box, you can mildly hint how immensely my noble self admires Miss Kirkwood, and even—"

"Careful, you foul-mouthed brute!"

"You have caught my meaning, then? Good enough! I never did care about mousing two words where one would suffice; so—just paint the situation in your most taking colors, and pinch the worthy old money-bags until he circulates—freely!"

"Here is pen and paper, Miss Kirkwood. Let's see what sort of use you can put them to. Remember, though, that if your task is not satisfactorily performed, 'twill all have to be done over again."

"If you don't care to help, don't you hinder, young hothead," the Chief of the Stranglers added, in grim warning to Kirkwood. "And, mind you, escape from here is simply out of the question. Try that on, and you will not only be con-

vinced, but you will be—silenced for all time!"

Leaving the writing materials with Lorella, and deftly severing the bonds which confined her arms, Jack Ketch turned away like one who feels no doubt as to the swift performance of the task allotted.

Brother and sister said nothing for a few moments, but then Allen sunk to the ground beside his sister, speaking with fierce earnestness:

"I'd rather die a thousand times over, than to yield to that scoundrel, 'Ella, but—oh, Satan roast him by inches!"

"Is there no—no method of escape, then, brother?"

Allen shook his head in gloomy fashion.

"If there is I can't see it, and Lord knows I've tried hard enough! I'd rather die than knuckle under to such a villain, and through such harsh threats, yet—what else? If we don't buy him off—but I can't tell you *that*, 'Ella!"

The strong man partly smothered a fierce groan, hands clenched so tightly that they seemed irregular balls of iron.

Sister clung to brother, now, for something in his looks and manner frightened the maiden worse than ever. She tried to ask what he meant, what he was holding back, but at first without success.

Allen read her wish aright, and knowing as he did that where so much had been said, more must follow, he burst out with the ugly truth.

"That infernal scoundrel—I'll kill him for that, if for nothing else! He says—he swears that father must pay twenty-five thousand dollars in hard cash for us, 'Ella, or else—he'll force you to marry him and—"

Lorella gave start and cry at this, and her face flamed hotly at the repulsive idea.

"Marry him? That awful villain?" she cried, sharply enough for other ears to catch and comprehend. "I'd die, first!"

"So I told the rascal, and so we'll make him understand if—"

Allen Kirkwood broke off abruptly, for just then Jack Ketch came striding back, right hand clenched and shaking in menace as he cried:

"That's enough, young fellow! I thought you had sense enough left to play half-white, but now—"

"You devil! I'll make you—"

Kirkwood leaped to his feet like one beside himself with fierce rage and intense hatred, but even as he crouched for a death-leap upon their arch-enemy, Jack Ketch flung up a hand and the loop of a lasso dropped over that head and those broad shoulders.

A mighty jerk sent Kirkwood to earth, and the Strangler Chief said:

"Don't hurt him more than you just have to, lads; but we've got to treat a fool according to his own folly. Now—reckon I'll do the rest of the talking myself!"

CHAPTER XIV.

A SHOT AND A BLOW.

The doom of the sleeper seemed surely sealed, for Peter Peltz had first made sure his rope was securely in place, then sprung upon the chest of his intended victim, laughing in diabolical glee as his hairy hands pulled fiercely at each end of the greasy rope.

Never in his life had Ralph Innes been more sweetly sleeping, worn and weary from his long tramping of the past day and larger portion of the night; but never had he been so rudely awakened!

A mountain's weight seemed falling upon his chest—mighty rocks seemed crushing, grinding, splintering bones and pulping muscles of both his arms—while balls of greenish fire looked down into—ha!

'Twas no hideous nightmare, but a grim reality!

"You devil!" the young man huskily panted, that closing rope shutting off the sounds so nearly that they failed to

reach even the ears of him who tried to give them fierce utterance.

Innes strove all he knew how to throw off that awful incubus, but the Strangler laughed at his efforts, clinging tight to his position, knees on arms, feet gripping those quivering thighs, weight of body all bearing down upon that stomach, while his hairy paws tugged and strained at the rope which was meant to measure forth a lingering, horrible death.

"Choke and strangle!" howled the assassin, his face fairly transformed to that of a veritable fiend of destruction. "Fight for breath, ye son of a sinner! Sip the cup ye thought to fill to overflowing for another and better man! Choke—smother—gasp and gurgle! Ha! ha! ha! Shiver and writhe, but devil spares ye not!"

Already the young man was beginning to turn purple in the face as that double turn prevented air from passing in or out. That handsome face was turning hideous, even so quickly!

The Strangler saw as much, and with diabolical malice he slightly lessened his grip, letting the pliant rope slip a trifle, thus prolonging the awful feast he had so carefully prepared for himself.

With an audible sound a trifle of air passed that constriction, and then, now tighter, then looser, only to close once more, the rope was manipulated by the demon in human guise, laughing and croaking the while, viciously enjoying the torments he was causing.

Surely he was insane? Surely he could not be held as wholly accountable for what he was doing?

One in full possession of his senses would never work such awful deeds as this! And yet—

"How do ye like it, yourself?" maliciously mocked the Strangler, bending over his almost helpless victim until face nearly touched face, red eyes glaring into eyes which were now blurred and bloodshot.

"A dose of your own infernal medicine, is it? Ha! ha! ha! The trapper trapped! The fowler caught in his own net!"

Ralph Innes made another furious effort to dislodge that crushing burden, fighting as only a strong man can fight for the life which he feels is surely forfeited else.

Heavier pressed that weight. Tighter grew that awful noose. Louder sung the angel of death in his ears, until it seemed as though the last of earth had surely come to him!

A frantic effort to break away, and Innes blindly lifted his head until face touched face. He made a dog-like snap, teeth touching that bulbous nose before the Strangler could draw his own head back.

Instinctively those teeth closed at touch of flesh, but Peter Peltz jerked away, giving a wild howl of rage and storm of curses as he felt skin and flesh tear loose, one hand dropping rope to fly up and caress that injured member.

Only for this brief reprieve, Ralph Innes might never have drawn another conscious breath, never more have looked upon aught of this fair world; but the greasy rope slipped again, and for the first time since that awful awakening came, the doomed sleeper caught a full breath.

Still, he was greatly weakened even by that brief strangulation, and instead of fighting for liberty while his enemy was absorbed in his lacerated nose, Ralph lay shivering and gasping, brain whirling in a wild dance and his wits too completely upset for prompt action.

Blood covered the Strangler's hand as it clasped over the marred nose, and he naturally fancied it worse injured than was the case.

Curses hot and furious followed that howl of pain, and then, as the young man began to struggle once more, Peltz gripped the rope and flung all his strength into the effort for death by the noose.

"Die, ye devil!" he hoarsely panted, now the picture of fury. "Choke and gasp and strangle—strangle—strangle!"

There could have been but one ending to this, and that must have come right speedily had the two men been left alone; but the end was not to come then, nor thus.

Peter Peltz had eyes, ears, thoughts only for this now helpless victim, and hence the light footfalls drawing near the cabin failed to set him on guard, and then a pale, scared face showed at the dingy window in the first rays of the rising sun.

One wild-eyed look, then the face faded away, but not to beat a retreat in fear or in dismay; far from it!

The front door was flung quickly open, and as Peter Peltz looked in that direction, a Winchester spoke sharply, and with a gasping moan the Strangler flung up his arms, falling over backward like one dead!

The next instant Kittie Crooks sprung across the threshold, dropping rifle to make better use of her strong young hands.

She gave a low, choking cry as she saw that purpled face, that protruding tongue, those glazing eyeballs; then, realizing what hideous work had been going on, she caught at the rope, pulling it away from the bruised throat as her other hand raised that heavy head a trifle.

With a gurgling, whistling sound the pent-up air rushed forth, then more gently sucked back, Ralph Innes shivering and moaning the while.

That told Kittie life yet lingered, and lent fresh strength for the emergency, she dragged the unconscious man further away from his overthrown enemy, with hasty fingers loosening the clothes about his neck.

She saw Peter Peltz lying there like one dead. She even took note of the red blood which flowed from a wound just above his right eye, and at the time she thought how surely her lead had followed her mind; for aim she had no time to take.

That one long breath seemed life enough, and yet—how awfully still this man now lay!

Was he dead? Had she come too late to cheat the strangler of this, his latest victim?

So it really seemed, just then, and with another sharp catch in her breath, Kittie Crooks bent nearer that face, now fading out to a more natural color as the thickened blood receded.

No! Ralph Innes was breathing, though so faintly, so slowly, so much like the final efforts of exhausted nature that her fears grew stronger rather than less.

Kittie drew back, flashing a swift glance about the room. This was not the first time she had been inside those four walls, and 'twas not long ere she found what she was looking for—the wooden bucket of water which stood in one corner.

Catching this up, lacking any smaller utensil, Kittie held it high in air, letting a slender stream of the fairly cool liquid fall full upon that paling face, hoping that the shock would aid the young man in rallying.

The result seemed fairly magical, and far better than the girl had dared hope for, since but a moment later Innes gave a shivering gasp, as a choking man will, then partly turned his head to escape that falling stream!

Kittie quickly lowered the bucket, taking a fold of her dress as she stooped to gently wipe away the wet, and then those big eyes opened to stare in her face!

"What—I don't—" huskily muttered Innes, lips parched and throat painfully sore and dry.

Kittie hastily found a cup and gave Ralph a drink. He swallowed mechanically, still looking at her with a dazed expression marking his own face the while.

"I never—a devil, then, but—now—an angel!"

Flushed warmly, the mountain maid drew back, confused by look even more than the words, which even her quick ear hardly made out.

Hardly conscious of what he was doing, or of what had taken place, Innes tried to restrain that receding face by lifting a hand, which felt so curiously heavy and helpless that his confused wits wandered that way for the moment.

"I don't—what's the matter with—Hannah?" he huskily mumbled, striving to pick up one hand with its mate, yet failing, as eyes deceived their master.

He seemed so utterly helpless that Kittie rallied, forgetful of self in another's needs, gently touching his damp forehead with her cool hand while speaking:

"You will rally in a few moments, Mr. Innes, and then—"

Ralph gave a start and a low ejaculation, his hand flying up to brush across his eyes; then his vision cleared like magic and he cried:

"It is—surely I know—Kittie Crooks!"

Again the girl of the mountains blushed divinely, and again she shrunk back timidly.

For the time being neither man nor maiden gave thought to yonder bullet-marked strangler, yet Peter Peltz was far from being harmless.

Although it looked as though that bullet had passed directly through his evil brain, the mountaineer was lifting that same head, was opening those blood-marked eyes, taking savage note of the maiden and the human prey which he had so nearly sent over the range!

A few moments thus, but only while his wicked wits were working clear of the tangle that bit of lead had thrown them into; then the Strangler silently moved right hand back to the heavy revolver which still rested in holster against his hip.

Just as silently he brought the weapon to the front, meaning to finish the evil work so lately begun; but again he was foiled, for a dark shape came bounding through the open door, striking swiftly with a club.

"Whirr-roo! ye divil o' Howth!" roared Barney O'Shea.

CHAPTER XV.

CHARGES AND COUNTER-CHARGES.

With a dexterity which told he was far more at home with stick than with gun, Barney O'Shea made his stroke, deftly knocking that ugly weapon aside just in time to save the life of the unsuspecting young man.

With pistol went hand, and a savage howl of mingled pain and fury burst from the baffled Strangler as blood flew from torn skin and sorely bruised knuckles.

"Ah-ha, me laddy-buck!" exulted the amateur detective as he followed up the vantage won, jerking Peter over upon his stomach and then squatting across the small of his back with far more weight than courtesy. "Aisy wid ye, now, an' av yees cayn't be aisy, be aisy as ye kin, faith!"

It all took place with such rapidity that neither man nor woman had a chance to act or to aid; but now, swiftly rallying from the partial stupor into which close-grazing death had cast him, Ralph Innes staggered to his feet, one hand clearing his misty vision, its mate fumbling for a weapon at his middle.

"What means—who ever—you, Barney?"

"Barney bedad! Av it wor *not* Barney, thin, pwhere w'u'd the loikes av yees be pwhin—aisy, ye squamblin' divil, yees!"

For Peter Peltz, realizing that only swift and sure action could avail him aught in this dire extremity, struggled with all his might to unseat that rough rider and so win enough freedom for a fight against odds.

But Barney was not so readily overturned, one hand gripping throat, another tangling fingers in that shaggy pow, while knees clenched ribs with pressure almost sufficient to make them crack.

"Hold fast—don't let him escape!" cried Kittie Crooks, quick to recognize the peril which would surely follow a breakaway. "He tried to murder Mr. Innes, and he is one of the—"

A howling roar came from the Strangler, cutting her hasty speech short. He fought desperately, giving Barney all he wanted to do to keep from being shaken off that squirming perch.

Ralph Innes now recognized the situation, and picking up the pliant rope which had so nearly cut short his own life, he aided O'Shea in securing the arms of the desperado, paying no heed to the howls and cries and curses with which Peltz strove to scare them both away.

Not until the murderer was bound past the power of helping himself or injuring others did the two men cease. Then Barney, grinning broadly and tugging at a loose-lying lock of sandy hair over an eye, rose erect and saluted the young lady.

"Faith, ma'am, 'twas a hurry-coon-in-widout-knockin', but phwin Oi saw how that thafe o' the woorld was toyin' wid his goon—"

"He meant murder!"

"And I owe you my life, I reckon, Barney," added Ralph, soberly, hand coming forth as further acknowledgment.

O'Shea turned hot and red at this, but he was too honest a fellow to take hand where heart could not follow, and turned aside with a painful fit of coughing which was louder than genuine.

Did Innes notice? Did he divine the cause? If so he made no sign, but turned toward the mountain maid, holding forth both hands as he began thanking Kittie for her timely shot.

"Only for that I would be a dead man ere this," he added, brokenly, holding her hands tightly between his own. "I came here through pure chance, and never so much as suspected what an infernal demon was giving me shelter until—too late to help myself!"

"I know—I was thinking of my—my father," faltered Kittie, slipping hands away and blushing brighter than ever as she caught something like a mocking laugh from the corner into which Peter Peltz had been dragged for the nonce.

This started the different explanations, and Barney came to the front once more, telling briskly how he had tracked the suspect from Salvation City into the hills, only to lose all trace of him after crossing the brawling river.

Hopelessly lost as to his own location, then, O'Shea lay out for the rest of the night, tired enough to sleep in spite of his natural dread of waking up to find himself swallowed by wild beasts, faith!

"An' thin, pwhin marning kem widout annybody callin' me to brickfasht, bedad, 'twas rustle, hustle or go hoongry, ye divil!" declared the Irishman, quaintly gesticulating. "An' so—an' so! 'Twas this way the nose av me tuck a pint, faith, shmillin' the shmoke av not the supper, an' thin—ow-wow! Crrrack-gebang! 'Twas an aavil-soundin' brick-fasht bill, sure, but pwhin in a divil's own counthry loike this, sor, an' ye, ma'am, it's the fool that's too critical, faith, an' so—an' that's the way av it all, begorra!"

"You chipped in at the right moment, old man, and I'll not forget it in a hurry, either," soberly declared Innes, again offering his hand.

This was even more awkward than the first time, but Barney was true to his colors, flushing warmly, yet shaking his head and clapping both hands behind his back without touch or shake.

Ralph frowned darkly, saying sharply: "What's the matter with you, Barney? Is my touch poison that you refuse to even take my hand after—come,

come, old fellow! Play white, can't you?"

"Faith, sor, an' that same's jist pwhat Barney O'Shea is thyrin' to do, thin," hastily spluttered the cook. "Av Oi knew jist phwat soort av a hand it wor ye was afferin' me, sor, thin—eh?"

For Kittie Crooks, sorely troubled over the unusually protracted absence of her father, had crossed over to where the Strangler was lying in bonds, speaking hurriedly yet distinctly enough for the Irishman to catch both words and meaning.

"My father—where is he, Mr. Peltz? You know; he surely came over here to see you, last evening, and now—tell me where he is?"

"Where? Nelson Crooks is—go to the devil and shake yourself!" harshly growled the ruffian, cutting himself short.

"But my father was—is—tell me, I beg of you, sir!"

But the rascal only grinned maliciously up into that pleading face, making no response, giving no answer save that surly sneer.

But Barney O'Shea caught the name, although he failed to rightly comprehend the tie of blood, and only thinking how best to escape the awkward dilemma into which the gratitude of Ralph Innes had cast him, blurted forth the news:

"Nilson Chrooks, is it, thin? Sure, ma'am, that blatherin' blaggaird bloody-murdered him lasht noight, at—howly Moses!"

For Kittie gave a choking cry, catching at her throat as she staggered back, saved from falling only by the swift action of Ralph Innes.

Peter Peltz broke into a coarse laugh as he watched and listened, but for the moment no one paid him attention.

Poor Kittie seemed stunned by the blow, although she managed to free herself from the young man's clasp, leaning against the side of the room, sobbing and panting sorely.

Again Ralph offered assistance, and again his aid was declined.

He stood for a few moments in irresolution, then turned upon the unlucky Irishman, gripping an arm with cruel force while saying, lowly:

"If you are lying, Barney O'Shea, I'll forget all you've done for me this day and—the truth, man! What about—her father?"

"Faith, sor, an' 'tis mesilf pwhich wishes 'twas ahl a loie, thin," candidly answered Barney, "but divil a loie is it at ahl, sor! He did it; murdered him loike a dog, bedad!"

Innes turned upon the bound Strangler, bending low enough to grip an arm and give it a fierce shake before speaking.

"You devil of all devils! Did you do this? If so—if you're guilty of butchering this lady's father, I'll see that you hang for it! Ay! I'll hang you higher than a summer kite!"

Instead of flinching or showing fear, the Strangler bared his wolfish teeth in an evil grin, then deliberately spat upward into that white, stern-set face above him, laughing harshly as Innes drew back with a jerk.

"Bah! Hang me, is it?" he cried, viciously, face reddening and veins swelling in time with his writhing muscles as he strove his utmost to burst or slip the rope which held him so impotent. "Better look to your own neck, blow-hard! Hang me? See that I don't fit the noose to *your* thrapple first-off, then!"

Barney O'Shea leaned a bit closer at this, his little eyes fairly aglow with interest, hands working as though they itched to close upon—whom?

Kittie Crooks rallied, just then, and with a courage which did her credit, came forward, pale and haggard through grief, yet still trying to hope in spite of her natural dread of evil.

Ralph instinctively put forth a hand to intercept her, but it was quickly pushed aside; then the mountain maid stood

close to the Strangler, speaking with forced composure:

"My father; tell me the truth, Peter Peltz! If you have—if he has come to harm at your hands—I swear by all mankind holds sacred that you shall pay the full penalty of the law! Now—my father?"

"You heard Paddy, I reckon, didn't you?"

"But—I ask *you*: where is my father, Peter Peltz?"

"Over to town—what's left of him, then!" came the vicious answer, followed by the words: "I never harmed him. Barney lied, there. It was the work of the pals he went back on: the Strangers, I reckon!"

Kittie shrunk back as though dealt a stinging blow full in the face. Ralph gently touched her, but again she recoiled from his assistance, and again she faced that evil knave in bonds.

"You lie when you say that my father was one of that evil gang," the mountain maid forced her lips to utter with false composure. "You dare to accuse him? You, Peter Peltz?"

"And you know that I'm fully justified in making that same charge, too, Kittie Crooks," surlily spoke the Strangler.

Like one who fears worse insult to a lady, Ralph Innes chipped in, with gentle force clasp that round waist and swinging the girl aside and further to the rear, then taking her place himself, frowning down upon the conscienceless villain upon whose brow was the bloody brand even then.

"And you betrayed yourself only a few minutes ago, Peter Peltz," the private secretary said, sternly, shaking forefinger over that face the while. "You are one of that evil gang, past all denial! Look!" and he further bared his own neck where the discolored welts showed significantly.

Instead of showing fear, or shrinking, the Strangler laughed aloud, his tones full if not clear, his reddened eyes glowing savagely the while.

"You laugh now, but later on—"

"Bah! What about later on? You dare not say aught, Ralph Innes, for you are deeper in the mud than I am in the mire!"

Barney caught his breath sharply at this, but as Innes flashed a glance that way, he recoiled a bit, again feigning a cough.

Ralph looked back to the Strangler, speaking sternly:

"You can't throw me off the right scent by crying wolf, Peter Peltz. If you are guilty of this latest foul outrage—unless you can read your title clear—I swear to never give over until your worthless life has paid full penalty, and then wish you were a cat to die over and over again!"

"When I pull hemp, *you'll* be climbing a tree right there, Innes. If the whole truth of that camp-raid ever comes to light, you'll hang, too mighty sudden for any sort of use!"

Now Barney could hold in no longer, and surging forward he cried:

"Spaake the truth, ye lvin' divil, yees! Till me phwat ye maane be that guff? Who sold out me masther, thin, Pater Piltz?"

CHAPTER XVI.

WHERE SATAN SERVED HIS OWN.

With fierce earnestness came that question, and for the moment he whose lips shaped it, had eyes, ears, thoughts only for the villain in bonds, through whom he hoped to solve that ugly mystery.

Peter Peltz flashed eyes from one face to the other, shaggy beard bristling as he gave a forced grin on meeting the burning gaze of the young man around whose neck so plainly showed the mark of the cord.

Was there a silent menace in those blue orbs?

Barney O'Shea followed that glance, and a suspicion of this very tenor forced

itself upon his busy brain. Quickly shifting his station so as to cut off further communication with his own broad shoulders, he spoke again:

"Spaake out, yet blatherin' spalpeen, thin! Till me: who was at the botthom av ahl that dirthy worruk, Oi say?"

Peter Peltz broke into a harsh, brief-lived laugh. He made one more attempt to break away from those bonds. Failing in this, he spoke in savagely distinct tones:

"Why ask me, when there's another here who can tell you so much better, you lunk-headed Paddy?"

"Ye maane—phwat do yees maane, thin, ye rashkil?"

"I mean Ralph Innes, no less!"

The owner of that name gave an involuntary start and seemed on the point of pushing forward, but Barney still held the right of way, and persisted in pressing that point fairly home.

"Pwhat has Misther Innes to do wid ahl this, faith? Wasn't he aff at the toime, clane over to Salvation City? An' wasn't he—"

"Head and spirit of the whole affair, and so I'm making my davy!" viciously cried the Strangler, throwing all reserve aside as though he no longer looked for aid or comfort in that direction. "I swear that Ralph Innes hired the Strangers to kill the old man and run off the two youngsters, for the purpose of selling their lives or their liberty!"

Kittie Crooks gave a low cry at this abominable accusation. Barney O'Shea turned squarely upon the accused, hands clenched and face all aglow with honest indignation.

But Ralph Innes himself showed no fear, no rage, naught save contempt and scorn, even breaking into a light laugh as though the charge was too frivolous for serious denial.

Not so Barney O'Shea. His suspicions had turned in that direction from the very first, and this seeming confirmation only added to their weight. Yet that bold front held him in check, and he simply said:

"D'ye hear that, thin, sor? Did ye—did ye do it, Misther Ralph?"

"Did I—no, you fool!" with sudden heat in face and in temper. "Only an idiot would ever think to ask such a question, and if you—"

"Why wouldn't he try to lie out of it, Paddy?" derisively cut in the Strangler, who plainly wished to get his two captors more deeply imbroiled, possibly thinking that thereby his own chances of escape would be increased.

But it was not to be. Barney lacked the hardihood to press his point home, and Innes apparently thought bare denial sufficient for all purposes, so far as he himself was concerned.

Not so when it came to the prisoner, though. Denials here went for less than naught, and the young man added threats to promise.

"I'll wring the whole truth out of you, you scoundrel, though I have to put you to torture such as would shame an Indian!" he vowed, sternly. "I'll take you over to Salvation, and once there—"

"I never done anything to pull hemp for, while you have!"

What manner of retort might have come from Ralph Innes will never be known, for Kittie Crooks, rallying bravely from the awful shock the unconsidered speech of Barney O'Shea had given her, again came to the front with questions which Peter Peltz sullenly refused to answer.

Barney fancied he saw an opening for making partial amends, and at once grasped at it.

With the best of intentions he declared that Nelson Crooks had received but slight injuries, and would hardly know that aught had happened him in a day from that blessed hour; but Kittie refused to put full faith in that assurance.

"No, no!" the mountain maid said, her voice catching painfully in her throat. "You mean well, sir, and I

thank you for it; but I know—I know that father will never come back home!"

"Sure, thin, ma'am—"

"He would never stay away so long if he could crawl—or even be moved," declared Kittie, her voice growing stronger with using it, although her pale face and dark-lined eyes told how seriously she had suffered through suspense since the evening before. "I must go to him, since he can never—come to—to me!"

She turned to leave the cabin, but Ralph quickly interposed.

"You cannot—you must not go alone, Miss Crooks. We will see you safely to town, if you can wait for a few moments longer."

"I thank you, sir, but I am not afraid. I know the way well."

"Allow me to insist, dear girl," urged Ralph, earnestly. "We will not hinder you, but be of assistance, rather. I'm going to take this rascal back to town, and if what Barney hints is true—"

That pale face suddenly flushed and those dulled eyes caught a fire which was almost savage in its brilliancy.

Kittie grasped the light Winchester which she had used in such a timely manner, even though the small pellet had glanced from that too-thick skull. She menaced the Strangler with its muzzle, and only for the prompt action taken by Innes there might have been another tragedy right then and right there.

"Patience, Miss Crooks," the secretary said while leading the maid from cabin to clear air without. "If Peter Peltz has done your father harm, be sure he shall be punished to the utmost extent of the law."

"The law? There is no law out here—for poor people!"

"Then I'll see to his reward myself," assured Ralph.

His soothing tones and kindly manner presently wrought the cure he desired, and then Kittie Crooks watched and waited for their further preparations.

At first the Strangler surlily swore that he would never walk a step in the direction of town, and for a short time threats nor arguments could shake that grim resolution; but when Ralph Innes drew a knife and freely made use of its keen point, the rascal yielded with an ill grace.

"Let up, curse ye!" he growlingly cried, flinching from that smarting spur. "I'll go, but—devil scorch me if I don't make ye both pay for all this: pay ten-thousand-fold, too!"

"Augh-yaugh, thin," quoth Barney O'Shea. "Blatherin' cooms moighty aisy to yees now, me laddy-buck, but afther that same divil begins his scoorchin', faith, 'tis little toime ye'll hev foor annythin' woorse thin wigglin' an' squarmin' ahl over the gridoin, begob!"

Between them the two men quickly prepared their prisoner for taking the road after submission was won. His arms remained bound, as a matter of course, but his lower limbs were left at liberty, since all would have to walk the miles lying between cabin and town.

During brief intervals Barney did some hurried foraging, finding enough cold victuals to satisfy his ravenous hunger to a degree. Since nothing better offered, he could hold out until at Salvation again.

Then the little party set forth, taking the most practicable route, guided by Kittie, who was perfectly familiar with that section, thanks to the years she had spent in the foothills along with her father.

During that tramp Ralph Innes found plenty of chances to watch and weigh the little maid, and unless his big blue eyes spoke falsely, he found his own reward in so doing.

This was not his first meeting with Kittie, by several. Chance had brought them together in the first place, while Ralph was out with his rod and line after a mess of mountain trout for the camp mess; but something more than

chance had led to his seeing her again—and still again!

And now, knowing that but for her hasty shot back yonder at the Strangler's cabin, death would have been his portion past all doubt, the private secretary gazed upon the maiden with still stronger interest.

Their route led to the river ford where Barney O'Shea had been thrown off the scent, and up to that time no serious trouble had been found in escorting the Strangler.

Peter Peltz looked surly and sullen enough, but beyond an occasional muttered curse or imprecation, he had moved along freely and easily enough; but as that ford was reached, he showed a disposition to balk, hanging back when Innes tried to force him upon the stepping-stones first of all.

Impatient at even that slight delay, anxious as she was because of her father, Kittie sprang past them all, nimbly tripping over the broken current to the further shore.

Then Peter Peltz yielded, seemingly realizing how worse than useless would be a stubborn fight where he was so helplessly hampered.

But—was he so helpless?

Those two stout guards hardly found him so a few moments later, for Peter gave Barney a savage kick in the stomach which fairly doubled him up, then shouldered Innes roughly, giving a hoarse yell of defiant hatred as he plunged headlong into the deep pool which lay below the ford!

Kittie gave a shrill cry of warning as she turned head to see this desperate stroke for liberty, and she flung up her Winchester as quickly as possible, pulling trigger even before butt could touch her shoulder.

There was no time for more: no time for aim or calculation: for even then that burly shape was vanishing amidst a cloud of spray and shower of water-drops.

Ralph Innes rallied swiftly, but too late to see more than those circling waves, but without stopping for thought or for speech, he likewise plunged from ford to pool, swimming boldly to the bend, there looking for the Strangler, feeling confident that Peter must come to the surface or drown, since his arms were still in bonds.

But he saw no head, heard no gasp of drowning wretch, found no sign of his prisoner though he waited and searched long and stubbornly.

Had the Strangler preferred drowning to hanging?

CHAPTER XVII.

A BUSY NIGHT FOR THE SPARKLER.

Together that warning note from Jack Ketch was discussed in all its bearings, Sparkler Steve taking a far more favorable view of the affair than Martin Kirkwood could attain.

As a matter of fact the Sport was more sanguine by nature, and as he held precious scant faith in the idea one ought always to look upon the gloomy side of matters, he feigned rather more than less confidence that all was bound to turn out right in the end.

"The sending of this very note is an evidence of conscious weakness when you come to peep below the surface," he declared, briskly. "It shows Jack Ketch is afraid of being run to earth before he can fully arrange his wires, and that is—"

"Yet you advise patience and waiting!" interrupted Kirkwood, with fire in tone as it surely showed in eyes.

"That's no lie, either," equably retorted the Sparkler, in no wise disturbed. "I so advise, not that I doubt success in case we rush matters so far as these scoundrels are concerned, but—your daughter, sir!"

"Then you really think?" hesitated the millionaire.

"I fear, rather," was the prompt

amendment. "To a man in your circumstances a few thousand more or less cuts but a trifling figure, but a daughter like Miss Lorella—that's heap-sight different!"

The old man made a passionate gesture at this.

"I'd rather live a beggar to my dying day than have aught of harm befall my darling!"

"I know it, sir, and that is precisely why I advise modest deliberation just at present. While I hold full faith we could handle the Stranglers, with Jack Ketch at their head, harm might easily come to the young lady while the rest of us were mixing up in a rough house. And so—I say wait with what patience can be mustered, until further word comes from the fellows across the board."

Terribly anxious though he was, Martin Kirkwood could not deny the force of this reasoning, and little by little he calmed, Sparkler Steve staying by him until that victory was fairly won.

"Since the rascals have opened up communications, sir, you can feel assured that no decided steps will be taken on their side of the table without fair notice to yourself. And so, to leave you in better fettle for the wind-up, suppose you try for another forty winks?"

Kirkwood protested that sleep was utterly out of the question so long as this awful suspense lasted; but the Sparkler Sport held fairer faith in the arts of the physician. He humored the old gentleman, craftily, and then, under cover of fetching a fresh sup of water, administered another portion of the sleeping draught without being suspected by the patient.

Half an hour later Martin Kirkwood was placidly slumbering, apparently good for the remainder of that eventful night.

Starlight waited by his bedside until fully assured that the old gentleman would not rouse up at his departure, then rose silently to his feet, a half-smile on his mustached lip as he gazed upon the sleeper.

"The face of a hard, strong-willed man!" muttered the Sport, hardly conscious of the sounds which crossed his lips. "The face of one who is unduly proud of his wealth, his position in life, his blue blood, his—and I?"

One hand flew out in swift gesture, and that smile almost turned to a sneer as he added:

"I am nearly penniless, living from hand to mouth, with no family and little more than a fair record to back me up! No! I am more than that: heap-sight more than that, for I am—over head and ears in love with your fair daughter, Martin Kirkwood!"

A curious confession, oddly made, but no harm was done if no particular good was accomplished.

The millionaire sleeper was past hearing, just then, and no other ears were nigh enough to make note of that avowal.

Laughing softly to himself over his own impetuous folly, the Sparkler Sport turned away from the side of the slumberer, opening the door and passing out of the chamber, pausing to listen again after gently closing the door.

Not a sound came from within, and satisfied that Martin Kirkwood was disposed of for the remainder of that night, Starlight moved away in the direction of his own apartment.

That, as already stated, had been turned over to the wounded mountaineer, Nelson Crooks; but the Sport had no immediate intention of going to bed, so the lack of sleeping accommodations did not trouble him.

Pausing briefly at the closed door, Starlight listened until a slight stir within convinced him the man of medicine was still on guard, faithfully caring for the injured man.

A cautious tapping at the portal brought Dr. Potter to the door, and though his frown faded a bit at sight of

the Sport, he seemed by no means eager to grant admission.

"Just for a minute or so," whispered Starlight, deftly slipping past the guardian and flashing a keen look upon the sick man. "I've coaxed the old gentleman off into a sound snooze, and now—no change, doctor?"

"No change to speak of; no, sir."

"But he's no worse, surely?"

"Nothing to speak of. In fact, since he's no worse, it is almost safe to pronounce him better, if you can comprehend the seeming paradox."

Sparkler Steve was gazing wistfully upon that pale, haggard face, changed so greatly since the evening before. If he heard that speech, he paid it no attention, presently speaking, guardedly:

"He looks plenty strong enough to talk sensible, doctor! I'd give a finger for just fifty words from his lips, if he would—let me take a flyer, pardner!"

"Not now," almost sternly checked the physician, hand closing upon an arm as though he meant to add force to his denial. "Every minute of this sleep is worth an ordinary hour. To break in upon it might make all the difference between life and death!"

"That's hard—mighty hard luck, Doc! If he might just say a word or two, even! For right there lies the right cue to this whole Strangler outfit—I'm willing to lay my life upon it, doctor!"

But the man of medicine was not to be stirred from the stand he had taken, by this or by any other argument the Sparkler might use. He shook his iron-gray head resolutely, then said:

"Can't help it, Starlight. I'm a doctor, first of all, and if my own life hung in the balance, I'd never allow this poor devil to be disturbed right now. You know me, old fellow; and so—no use!"

Sparkler Steve fully realized so much, and drew a long breath which lacked little of being a sigh as his gaze came reluctantly away from the face of the sleeper.

"All right, doctor. I can't keep on kicking when you take that tone. But mind: no matter the hour, or what I may be doing, let me know just as soon as Crooks rouses up. You will promise me this, honest?"

"Yes. Now you'd better go, I reckon. Good-night—morning, rather!"

Leaving the sick-chamber, Sparkler Sport passed to the lower floor, pausing at the office long enough to direct another chamber to be prepared for his occupancy on his return, then passed out under the stars.

Those broken accusations made by Nelson Crooks were still ringing through his busy brain, and he began the quest for Peter Peltz, meaning to win a more perfect alibi from that burly knave in case he should be met up with.

But that meeting did not occur, and look where he might Sparkler Steve failed to find the fellow, or to learn any definite tidings concerning him, beyond a certain point.

There were not lacking those who could tell him of the convivial pair who had made the rounds in company, industriously "shingling" the greater portion of the "all-night places" in Salvation; but no one seemed able to tell him just whither Peter or Barney had gone, eventually.

While thus occupied the Sparkler Sport came in contact with another fairly famous character in that section: Vincent Messick, gambler, chief, all-around sport.

Just now "Vin" seemed on the verge of one of his "periodicals," during which he was mighty apt to prove himself a burden to his friends and a terror to his enemies.

Not that Messick was actually drunken—when he reached that stage of his "periodical," 'twas "wake, snakes, and hunt your holes" in hasty earnest; but he was "crooking his elbow" after an ominous fashion, and his usually reticent tongue was wagging far more lively than common.

He tackled the Sparkler Sport at sight, volubly denouncing the infernal gang which had brought a blight and a curse upon the country, asking how much longer decent citizens would meekly stand such doings?

"Why, man, dear, it's ruin—just ruining the business interests of Salvation! Here I've been—been trying my level prettiest to get a game started this six hours past, and here I am—with nothing better to do than curse the luck and pour bad whisky down the red lane!"

"Better play right hand against left, Messick. Whisky is sure to down you, no matter what you draw to," advised the Sport, soberly.

"Who licensed you to start preaching, Sport? Better—we'd all better brace up and hunt those strangling devils off the face of the earth! I'm in for just that sort of game! I'll go myself, and I'll pay wages to another half-dozen, for this campaign or the war! Whoo-up! Who talks next?"

Messick whirled on a heel, flashing eyes over one and all there present, then speaking on as no other one volunteered:

"I hate 'em—hate 'em all worse than I do rank poison! I have said it many a time, and now I repeat: this gang of Jack Ketch ought to be run off the face of the earth, and I'll tackle the job by my lonesome if there's never another man in all Salvation with enough backbone to go me pards!"

"For shame, ye cursed curs! To let such an outfit run the whole country, and ruin your business, and cover your town with dirt! For shame on such white-livered whelps of cowardice! While I—I alone will make 'em hustle to—to—who said take a horn?"

Not the Sparkler Sport, for one, and he passed out of the saloon while the others were lining up in front of the bar.

A half-smile was upon his face, but there was little mirth in his soft chuckle as he turned face once more toward the Midway Hotel.

"Methinks he doth protest too loudly!" crossed those lips, slowly. "I wonder if it wouldn't fetch pay dirt to sink a shaft through that fool's memory-box? And yet—I can hardly think him one of that outfit, either!"

While moving toward his hotel, Sparkler Steve dropped in at one or two more saloons, on the off-chance of hitting off scent or striking information worth the trouble; but nothing came of these ventures, and he reached the Midway with a belief that Peter Peltz had jumped the town for the present, while Barney—

"Gone back to the camp, I wouldn't wonder," mused the Sport as he passed on after obtaining the key to his new room. "He's an odd genius, is Barney, but nothing crooked about him, surely! Can't say as much for Peter, though! If there isn't the shadow of a noose about his blessed neck, then there's something out of whack with my mental optics: yes!"

Never once thinking of possible peril to himself, and bent only on catching a comfortable "forty winks" before the new day should grow too old, Sparkler Steve passed on to his chamber, inserting key, turning it quickly, then pushing the door open for his own admittance.

Even as he stepped inside, Starlight caught a spitting sound, then took note of a scattering spark of fire close in front of his breast.

Swift as thought itself he grasped this, gave a fierce wrench and twist, which tore the thing free, then hurled it through window-glass and all—then came a tremendous explosion which seemed to shake the hotel.

CHAPTER XVIII.

A ONE-SIDED ARGUMENT.

That heavy fall seemed to take much of the life out of Allen Kirkwood, and before he could offer any actual fight,

he was placed beyond making serious trouble.

Jack Ketch watched the work until it was complete, at the same time hindering Lorella from making any outcry, his gloved touch seemingly paralyzing the poor child for the moment.

"You're a bigger fool than I took you for, youngster, and that's needless," grimly quoth the Strangler, as Allen was jerked to his feet and held helpless by his captors. "I gave you a fair chance to do the crowd full credit, and now—like this!"

"You devil!" hoarsely panted the prisoner.

"What comes next, boss?" asked one of the ruffians.

"Run him back where he came from. See that he don't make further bother, but don't harm him beyond that. He's worth money, if he is an idiot of the rankest stripe!"

Without giving Kirkwood a chance to say more, the Strangers hurried him away from the spot, leaving their chief with Lorella.

The maiden was trembling like a leaf, more through fear for her hot-headed brother than herself, however. Still, she was brave enough to hold back her cries, her sobs, all outward evidence of that fear, lest such expression still further anger Jack Ketch.

The Strangler Chief was ready enough to talk business, for his part, and when his fellows had vanished from view with their stubborn charge, he settled down near the maiden, like one who means to settle matters once for all.

"Failing your brother, Miss Kirkwood, I reckon you and I will have to do the preliminary chin-chin. This affair wants arranging mighty badly, and so—right here you have the nubbin of it all!"

"We've got you foul. We've taken every trick so far, and hold the rest of the trumps. You can't win out, try though you may; so—what's the use? Why not come down gracefully, since come you must?"

Lorella murmured something: she hardly knew just what: but Jack Ketch waved his hand as though requesting silence, and then spoke on:

"The idea of it runs pretty much like this, my dear. We need money, while your father needs his kids. That naturally suggests an exchange, which fetches us down to bedrock. Now—lend me thy ears, Sweetness!"

"Here you are, and we can hold you against all the men your more or less worthy daddy could enlist in six months. Fighting can't help you away, but hard cash can win out without wasting so much as a cartridge!"

"I'm almost ashamed to look you in the face while mentioning such a petty figure for such a charming prize, but the word has been spoken, and I never go back on my say-so. That means, twenty-five thousand ducats pays for both yourself and your brother: no more, no less!"

Lorella plucked up courage at this, and in slightly tremulous tones made answer:

"I know—I feel sure father would pay that much, sir, if he knew just how—that is—"

"When he knows that it is pay ransom or go into full mourning?" coolly cut in the Chief of the Strangers. "Just so! And that forms part of the peppergram, my dear."

"I've already supplied the materials, which I desire you to use pretty much after this fashion: First listen to my terms, then set down the solid facts in your own words. That may impress your worthy dad all the more forcibly, you understand?"

"What am I to tell him, sir?"

"First make him understand that both yourself and brother are in sound bodily health. That you are liable to remain in that same condition unless an effort is made by your friends to rush matters faster than I prescribe."

"In that case bodily harm may come to one or to both, while financial injury most assuredly will strike Mr. Kirkwood."

"You mean—I hardly understand you, sir?" faltered the maiden.

"Simply this: that an attempt on part of your father or your friends to rescue you before the hard cash is paid, will be met by failure so far as you are concerned, and a raise in the price of ransom."

"Take me with the grain, and I'm soft as silk and smooth as velvet. Brush me contrary—well, don't you do it! I'd turn beast to your beauty, and then—good-by!"

For all Jack Ketch spoke with a certain lightness, Lorella shivered and shrunk away as far as her bonds would permit; for her ankles still remained tied, although that keen blade had set her arms at liberty.

The Strangler saw this, then chuckled as though amused by the effect of his thinly masked menace.

"Enough on that score, I fancy, Miss Kirkwood. I'd hate like sin to play you dirt, but business is business, and my faith is pledged to my gallant lads, you understand? Just now I am master, but if a slip-up in this little speculation should come—chaos!"

"I will write—I will set down all you tell me, sir," said Lorella, eager to end the ordeal as quickly as might be. "Only—I hardly comprehend just what it is you desire me to tell father."

"Well, that's easily remedied, my dear. Just make him understand that you are not treated so mighty badly, but that your future depends entirely upon himself—and his hard cash! Mention the full price, in figures so plain that he can't well mistake them."

"When so much is done, I'll speak further."

Seeing that her captor meant immediate compliance, Lorella took pen and paper, writing upon her knee for lack of a more steady desk.

The first words came slowly and awkwardly enough, but then the pen moved more freely and line after line was added to the page, until Jack Ketch flung up his hands in mock horror.

"Go easy, my dear little dumpling! It isn't a three-volume novel I ask you to indite, but a simple note which—let me see just what you have written, anyway."

Before Lorella could divine his intention, Jack Ketch secured the paper, running eyes swiftly over those flowing lines, giving an occasional grunt as he read.

Whether this meant satisfaction or disapproval, the girl had no means of knowing, so she sat in silence through that reading.

"A blind man would know a woman wrote it," remarked the Chief of the Strangers, as he handed back the paper. "Well, the old gentleman will have time enough to wade through it all, I reckon, and he'll be all the surer it comes direct from your hands. So—go on, dear!"

"What more shall I write, sir?" timidly asked Lorella, in doubt.

"Something like this, please. Add that only fair dealing is asked for, and that any attempt to play double, or to trick us after an exchange, will be met with worse than defeat. Go on, little one."

Lorella obeyed, putting the hint into as compact a form as she knew how, then reading it to the Strangler.

"Good enough! With a little more practice we might set up in business as model letter-writers—ahem!"

"There is more to say, sir?" ventured Lorella.

"Heaps of it, my angel, and the next chunk shapes like this: The exact manner of exchange will be told by word of mouth when my messenger gets there, but it can do no harm to let the old gentleman understand that my say-so rules from start to finish."

"He shall procure the hard cash: no

personal checks, no drafts, nothing which can be played double on. He shall take this cash to the spot I will name through my messenger. He shall go there alone, or accompanied only by my messenger; and if any other person or persons attempt to chip in, either with or without his knowledge and consent, the deal is off, and I'll strike him again, heavier than ever!"

Lorella hesitated to put this into words, and Jack Ketch gave a vigorous nod, then said:

"Write it out, Miss Kirkwood, please. Nothing like having everything understood in advance, you see."

"But—I'd rather not—"

"Rather not what?"

"You are not laying a trap for my father, sir?"

Jack Ketch laughed, but there was a false ring to his notes which only served to confirm the sudden suspicion which had assailed the maiden, and flinging down the pen, Lorella cried out:

"I will not be a party to any such vile trick, sir! I'll never aid in bringing fresh trouble upon my poor papa, when—"

"You say you won't? Then—all right, my stubborn little angel! Suppose we try something else, just for beans?"

Lifting hand to lips, Jack Ketch sounded a prolonged whistle, the echoes of which floated far away through the night.

After a comparatively brief delay Lorella caught sight of moving shapes across yonder in the shadows. Those shapes quickly emerged into the red glow from a campfire, and a sharp cry escaped her lips.

"Quiet, you silly!" muttered the Chief of the Strangers, leaning far enough her way to clap a gloved hand over lips, cutting short the agitated speech which was just about to take shape.

Lorella struggled faintly, but stared in terror at yonder shapes: one of which was that of her brother Allen, held powerless in the grip of three athletic Strangers, while a fourth stood with hand on throat, forcing back head and face, while above them quivered an ugly-looking knife.

Helpless though the young man surely was, he could use his voice, and just then cried out hoarsely to his sister:

"Stand firm, Ella! Unless—"

"Button him up, boys!" ordered Jack Ketch, then turning again toward the terrified maiden to add:

"Write as I order, girl, or by all the gods! yonder knife shall drink dry the heart of your brother! Speak: will you obey?"

"Don't—I will say what—spare him, I beseech you, sir!" quavered the thoroughly scared girl, shivering like a leaf in the storm.

"All right. Let up on him, lads. I reckon we'll get along without further trouble, but—just hold him in sight until the writing's done. Now, my love, here's your pen: write!"

CHAPTER XIX.

JACK KETCH PUSHES MATTERS.

Through love for her brother that brief rebellion was promptly put down, and feeling that now all would be smooth sailing before him, Jack Ketch watched Lorella as the girl wrote from memory.

When her pen ceased and she looked up as if for further instructions, the Chief of the Strangers took the paper, reading what had so far been set down.

He gave a curt nod of approval, then spoke:

"You're a jewel: a veritable daisy dipped in dew, Miss Kirkwood! I really regret that I've begun negotiations for your ransom; really!"

"Sir!"

"Honest to Abraham, sweetness! Here I am, crawling along toward the sere and yellow, still in single wretchedness,

while a bunch of angel-food of your bigness fairly ready to tumble into the arms of one who could appreciate you as none other—hello!"

Lorella shrunk away with a choking cry, frightened more by this grim playfulness than she had been while threatened by those same hidden lips.

Apparently Allen Kirkwood also caught the meaning if not the very terms, for he wrested himself partially free from his masked guardians, crying out menacingly:

"Let up on that, you scoundrel! I'll pay you off in hot coin if you even dare—"

"Don't twist a limb off, or snap his vertebra, gentle lambs," mockingly called back Jack Ketch, as his fellows again forced their charge into subjection. "A body wouldn't think it, just to look and listen, but that same contrary kid is worth a cool ten thousand chucks! So—be as mild with him as he'll let you, please."

So much for the benefit of that young hotspur, then the Chief of the Strangers turned again toward Lorella, speaking in altered tones:

"You hardly seem to appreciate a little joke, Miss Kirkwood, but let that pass. Business is good enough for yours truly, and we'll finish up what we've fairly started."

"What you've indited is all right as far as it goes, but there are a few minor points which may as well be tacked on. If no room is left for questioning one's meaning, so much the less excuse or kicking up a racket when pay day rolls around."

Then, in clear, crisp tones, Jack Ketch added the items he had in mind, which were faithfully set down by the maiden.

Another look over the communication, then the outlaw expressed his full approval, after which Lorella was directed to append her name in full, shaping it so carefully that no question of forgery might arise.

"Not that I'm so powerful anxious to see the last of you, Miss Kirkwood," he declared, his voice sounding more earnest than jesting. "So far as my personal fancy runs, I wouldn't put on mourning if you should be elected to linger here for the rest of your life. Still, business is business, and that runs pretty much like this:

"I want the old gentleman to know for certain that this note comes directly from you, and that it means just what is here set down in black and white."

"I have tried my best to write as you directed, sir."

"And you have succeeded to a marvel, my dear," declared Jack Ketch. "Still, there might be a lingering doubt as to the authorship, don't you see? And anything like that might cause delay for further light. So—write your name so daddy can recognize it at a glance, please."

Again Lorella obeyed, her one wish now being to satisfy this loquacious villain as perfectly as might be. For Allen was still held under the knife, and right well she knew how hot was his temper, how difficult to bend his will.

Like one fully satisfied with the document, Jack Ketch turned away, leaving Lorella with arms at liberty for the time being, apparently forgetting that much, or else feeling secure in the watchfulness of his lusty knaves.

At a nod from their master, the Strangers forced Allen Kirkwood away, passing beyond eye-range of the anxious maiden yonder.

"That will do," said Jack Ketch, when content with the move as made. "You can leave him with me now, lads."

The fellows immediately withdrew, and Kirkwood shook his person as though trying to cast off all defiling touch.

There as sufficient light just there for keen eyes to read faces fairly well, and Jack Ketch must have seen how

fiercely sullen was his captive. If so, the fact bothered him but little.

"Now, my dear boy, it's you and I for it," was his opening, paper in one hand, while its mate lightly touched one of those strong shoulders. "Try and act sensibly for once, even if it should strike in with fatal effect. The night is well spent, and there's nothing like beginning the new day in ship-shape order. Sabe, kid?"

"What is it you want?" surlily demanded Kirkwood.

"What I'm going to get, never you worry, old man. And, as a starter, here you have it, right from the shoulder."

"You shall be my messenger and go-between, for lack of a better, and when—"

"If I refuse?"

"You'll not refuse, but do precisely as bidden," came the cool retort. "You will bear my ultimatum directly to your father, now at Salvation City, and add any information which this message of mine may lack."

"So you say."

"And so I mean. You don't count for so mighty much, even if I have placed a neat little price-tag about your noble neck; but your sister—"

"Look out, curse you!"

"That's different," coolly persisted Jack Ketch, in no wise disturbed by these fierce interjections. "When your father fairly comprehends that her safety hangs on close compliance with my terms and conditions, I have little fears as to his actions."

"The ransom is to be paid in cash; gold, silver, or bills; no check or draft, nothing which may be used as an after-clap, bear in mind."

"This sum is to be taken to Painted Flat; you know the place?"

Allen nodded, sulkily, and Jack Ketch spoke on:

"I thought as much. All right. To Painted Flat, then. Taken by yourself and Mr. Kirkwood alone, you understand?"

"Why are you so confoundedly particular, just so the money is turned over to you?"

"That's all right, my critical young friend. Would you take along an army to witness the exchange?"

"I'd have enough there to see fair play, anyway."

"I'll attend to the fair play part, thank you, sir. And just bear in mind that I'm shaping terms and conditions for both sides."

"It takes two to make a bargain."

"Not in this case. Only one, and I am that important individual. I say you obey. If not—Miss Kirkwood pays the cost. And that—well, lacking the gold we can have dead loads of fun! She would make a mighty dainty prize to be set on high in a lottery for my pretty lads, don't you reckon?"

There was more in tone than in words, significant though the latter were, and Allen Kirkwood seemed about to hurl himself bodily at the arch-villain, when he was checked by the muzzle of a revolver staring him fairly in the face.

"Steady by jerks, kid!" came the harsh warning. "I've taken all the nonsense from you the law allows, and from this forward we'll talk business straight."

"Martin Kirkwood will find my terms set down in this paper, but you can add to them at will. Make him see that he has no option. Show him that square dealing is absolutely necessary on his part, for any attempt to trick or to cheat will be met by brute force."

"Sure as the sun is creeping over the hills yonder, I'll kill both father and son at the first hint of crooked play, then turn yonder girl over to my Strangers for them to treat as their humor dictates!"

Viciously enough came these threats, and hotly did Allen Kirkwood answer them back.

"Enough, you demon! The ransom

shall be paid, of course, but after that—"

"Go on, now, you've made a fair beginning," mocked Jack Ketch.

"After that—look out! I'll hunt you down, though you try to hide your evil head at the bottom of the deepest pit of Tophet! And when found—sure as there is a heaven above us both, I'll never give over until you have hung like a sheep-killing cur!"

Instead of betraying resentment at this fierce menace, the Chief of the Strangers laughed carelessly before saying:

"Barking dogs seldom bite, and if I'm safe until you do the deed, I have mighty little need of life insurance, old fellow. Now—listen."

"I'm going to send you off for Salvation City to play your part in the wind-up. See that you make no ugly mistakes, or the wind-up will wind up your life, dead certain!"

"Take the cash to Painted Flat as soon as you can raise it, but go there alone with the old gentleman. If not—well, some of us will be where we can see, if not seen, and anything like foul play will break off all negotiations—that minute!"

"Play fair, and there shall come no boggle on my side of the board. Beauty goes for booty, and if your dad is content, reckon we ought to be pretty much the same."

"That's enough, and enough satisfies a porker, so—fetch the nag, you fellows!" lifting his voice to match his will.

Either the Strangers had been posted in advance, or else they were marvelously swift to divine a want, for with very slight delay a horse was brought to the front, saddled and bridled, and ready for the road.

With a swift motion Jack Ketch cut the bonds which held Kirkwood impotent, drawing back a bit as he spoke on:

"A final word or two, my dear boy, which may help confine you to the straight and narrow path which leads to—ahem!"

"As you can see for yourself, the new day is just on the point of dawning. By the time yonder sun shows his forehead, we'll be on the move as well."

"The move?" echoed Kirkwood.

"What do you mean by that?"

"Merely that we will shift quarters as soon as you start for Salvation City, leaving no trail behind us. This to guard against any possible trick on your part, or that of Kirkwood friends. Understand?"

"That you are wasting time and breath, yes. We'll do nothing of that sort until after the exchange is made. Then—on guard!"

"That's all right, my hearty. Let us once close hooks on the ducats and the rest may go hang! Now—jump aboard, pardner."

Allen Kirkwood acted promptly enough now, nimbly springing into the saddle and holding the spirited animal with a strong hand.

By that dim gray light his face showed unusually pale, but his eyes looked all aglow as he bent a bit toward Jack Ketch, to hurl a final threat into that masked face.

But the Chief of the Strangers apparently deemed enough said, for his gloved right hand flew up as a check, his voice sounding stern and peremptory:

"Careful, Mr. Kirkwood! I've let you chin-chin more than enough for a dozen, and now—business!"

"Go convey the message I've trusted you with. Warn Martin Kirkwood to play white, and to keep all outsiders in the dark until our little bargain is finished. After that—"

"We'll hunt you down to the gallows, you demon!"

"Take him in charge, lad," as another horseman came to the front. "Set him on his way, and you," to Allen, "silence, or I'll gag you!"

CHAPTER XX.

GOOD-BY TO PETER PELTZ.

That daring break for liberty took Ralph Innes completely by surprise, and Barney O'Shea was still worse confounded.

The Irishman was disabled for the time being by that vicious kick, but his companion acted promptly enough.

One flashing glance over that troubled pool, then Innes plunged after his prisoner, rising to the surface an instant later, shaking the water from his head and face while looking around for his human quarry.

There was nothing to be seen of Peter Peltz, even when the current and his own vigorous strokes carried Ralph to the bend for a wider view, although so brief an interval seemed insufficient for even such a daring knave to make an escape good.

There were no signs of his having left the river on either shore, there quite high and rocky. If any such effort had been made, a wet trail would certainly have betrayed the fact.

Could it be that Peter was still swimming below the surface, heading down stream?

There appeared to be no other solution, and Ralph Innes took precautions to watch, himself passing further down the current, eyes on the keen alert.

He knew that 'twould be impossible for Peltz to leave the water at any point below, to which even a man-fish might attain without rising for breath; and yet the moments rolled up to minutes without any such reappearance!

For fully ten minutes the secretary maintained his close watch, but nothing came to reward him, while the vigorous calls from Barney at the ford above proved plainly enough that Peter had not tried a double back.

There was only one other plausible explanation—that in making his hasty plunge, Peter Peltz had struck against some sunken rock, breaking neck, fracturing skull, or else knocking him senseless at once.

If so, in all probability he now lay somewhere at the bottom of yonder deep pool; and, acting upon this belief, Innes returned, to time and time again dive in the pool and grope blindly along its rock-strewn bottom.

In vain. If Peter was there, such blind searching failed to find his carcass, and finally Ralph gave over.

If only himself had been concerned, doubtless he would have persisted longer, for there was a liberal sprinkling of the bulldog in his composition; but Kittie Crooks was worrying sadly over her father, and rather than permit her to complete that trip alone, Innes would cut his own quest short.

Then, too, he declared his own anxiety to take more profitable action concerning his cousin, his promised bride.

"So far I've been of no use at all," he confessed, rather moodily, as he came back from the cover under shelter of which he had as well as possible wrung out his wet garments. "I thought I might be able to trail those demons home, but I failed—failed most wretchedly!"

Barney O'Shea turned face aside and lifted a hand to mask a cough which hardly seemed to be genuine.

Kittie said nothing in words, although her paling cheeks and fluttering breath might have told tales to a very close observer.

Just then Ralph Innes was staring at yonder now silent pool where Peter Peltz had so strangely vanished from their ken all in a moment.

"Good-by, Peter! Satan grant you such repose as your actions in this life so richly merit!" grimly spoke the young man, then turning away to offer a helping hand to the mountain maid.

But Kittie took it not, hurrying up the slope until once more on their way to Salvation City.

But very little talk marked the way.

Kittie was too deeply agitated by what she knew and what she feared. Barney preferred to watch and study this fair-seeming man, whom he felt nearly convinced was rotten to the bone, while Ralph Innes had ample food to occupy his brain.

The journey was by no means a short one; yet the route was not so very difficult for foot-passengers, and the trio made remarkably good time, without at all overtaking their physical powers.

As a rule, Kittie Crooks led the way, and where a girl led, strong men could hardly lag far behind.

The poor girl was in a fever of apprehension, for she knew her father must be seriously injured when he failed to return home, after what had passed between them.

Seeing this, Ralph tried to relieve her killing suspense, drawing further assurance from Barney's lips that Nelson Crooks was only slightly hurt; but all such efforts were in vain.

"You mean well, sir," the mountain girl said, trying to steady her tones bravely enough, but only in part succeeding. "I thank you—thank you both, from the bottom of my heart. But—I know!"

What more could be said? Nothing. And so the trio hurried on toward Salvation City, each one thinking more or less deeply the while.

Kittie caught breath sharply as she caught her first glimpse of the town, lying yonder on the level. It seemed just the same as ever, although the sad change which had come to her surely ought to have wrought a like difference yonder.

She started ahead almost in a run, and Barney took chance to let drop a warning whisper for Ralph Innes:

"Faith, sor, 'twu'd be a divil av a stroke av she was lit roon full ahnto the carps av her ould mon, begorra! Don't yeess think, sor—"

Ralph Innes was thinking pretty much the same thing, and once again he strove to advise and guide the mountain maid; in vain.

"I know what you fear, sir," Kittie said, looking him full in the eyes with her own fevered orbs the while. "I must hasten to daddy. If he still lives—"

"He surely does!"

"He will need me all the more, then, sir," quietly said Kittie, with just the ghost of a smile flickering into and out of her pale face. "If not, if he has—is—oh, daddy, daddy!"

Her forced composure gave way, and for a few minutes found vent in passionate tears. Innes gently supported her trembling frame, but wisely held his peace, knowing that this would eventually result in good.

And so it proved to be.

Her overstrained nerves seemed relieved and calmed by tears, and presently Kittie was able to proceed, now steadier than ever, better able to meet and bear up under what fate might have in store.

The day was yet young when the trio entered Salvation City, and they were fortunate in reaching the Hotel Midway without encountering any one who inconvenienced them in the least degree—a fact for which Ralph Innes was grateful enough, judging from his face and the long breath which he drew when the hotel was fairly reached.

He gave a start and little exclamation as he took note of an ugly rent in one side of the building, between the first floor and second story, where that infernal machine had expended its force without material injury to mortal being, luckily enough.

Kittie hurried to the front entrance, having thoughts only for her father, knowing from Barney's lips that the injured mountaineer had been taken to a room beneath that roof.

She was met at the door and promptly checked by Dr. Potter in person, who at once recognized the girl.

"Wait, Kittie," he said, quickly, as his hands clasped hers. "You can't go up like this, you know!"

"Father is—isn't—oh, doctor!" panted the poor girl, vainly fighting for composure even as she tried to utter words which stuck so tightly in her throat.

"Mr. Crooks is alive, and doing to the full as well as can be expected," assured Dr. Potter, his honest eyes frankly meeting her gaze. "But he must not be agitated, you know. Be brave, else I'll have to bar you from his chamber, together with all others, little woman."

One burning look, then Kittie drew a long, free breath. She read the glad truth there, and now that the worst was past, she gathered her nerve and spoke in calm, even tones:

"I will, doctor. Only take me to father. He needs me; I know he needs me, sir."

"You will obey orders, then?" with a keen gaze in turn. "I see that you will, Kittie, so come. You can go there, but none others, as yet."

This with a half-nod toward Innes and O'Shea, who had drawn near in curiosity or warm friendship.

Neither man tried to force his company upon him, however, and without further delay Dr. Potter conducted Kittie to the chamber resigned to Nelson Crooks for the time being.

The injured man was sleeping when they entered, looking very pale and haggard; so much so, that poor Kittie had to bite her lips sharply to keep from crying out in grief at the awful alteration.

Then, without stir or sound, those heavy lids lifted, and Crooks gazed straight into the face of his only child, kneeling there at his bedside.

Kittie forced a smile as she gently kissed his forehead, but Crooks showed no surprise at her presence. He smiled faintly in recognition, then looked past and beyond that fair head, like one seeking sight of yet another person.

Dr. Potter stepped forward, quietly asking what was wanted, and then Nelson Crooks spoke, his voice low but steady, and tones clear:

"I want—I was only waitin' fer my gal. Now—send fer Sparkler Sport, please, will ye, Doc?"

"All right, Crooks. I'll send for him after a bit. Just now you'd better lie quiet and not try to talk too much, don't you know."

"I want—now!" with a touch of irritation in his tones. "Talkin' cain't hurt like holdin' in—this yer way, nohow! I want him; jest him, ye mind, Doc?"

"Mr. Starlight, is it, Crooks?"

"Yes. He's white; clean white from A to Ampersand! An' jest now that's the sort I need—need mighty bad, too!"

"If he can come—"

"He must come! I need him—bad! I want help sech as he kin give, an' I need it turribly hard, too! Fetch him, Doc, ef ye're a man yerself!"

CHAPTER XXI.

BARNEY O'SHEA MAKES ANOTHER BREAK.

Thanks to his swift action, the Sparkler Sport had escaped all injury from the infernal machine which had, past a doubt, been intended for his destruction or disability.

The devilish contrivance had been attached to the door in such a manner that the mere act of opening that barrier would start the cunning mechanism, and had Starlight delayed even an instant, the results must have been disastrous to himself.

Instead, only the outside of the Hotel Midway suffered, while the machine itself was utterly destroyed, thus leaving no possible clue to the dynamiter.

"Whoever it was, did his nasty work in a hurry," decided the Sparkler, after investigation. "Who knew what room would be assigned me? Or, in fact, that I meant to bunk in at all?"

Those queries were far more easily asked than answered, and after a brief

thought, the Sport hardly attempted to reply. Doubtless this was but another act of the Strangler Gang, and he let it pass for that.

Still, the incident drove all thought of catching "forty winks" from his head, since it was nearly broad-day when the brief-lived excitement blew over, and in place of sleeping, Starlight devoted his care and attention to Martin Kirkwood.

He was with the capitalist, now pretty well himself once more, when Kittie Crooks and her double escort reached town; but he heard no sound which might enlighten him as to that arrival, and hence failed to put in an appearance at the sick-chamber, as he otherwise might have done.

For his part, Barney O'Shea showed far greater resentment at being rejected by Dr. Potter than did Ralph Innes, and so powerful was the cook's curiosity that he shortly afterward crept silently into the hotel and up-stairs, little by little drawing nearer that closed door behind which even then might be transpiring so much of burning interest to this amateur detective.

And so it chanced that Barney was pitched upon by Dr. Potter as the handiest fellow around to carry word to the Sparkler Sport.

Although greatly against his better judgment, the man of medicine could no longer resist the urgent plea of Nelson Crooks, and was starting forth in search of Stephen Starlight, when his eyes alighted upon Barney O'Shea.

A very few words told the delighted camp-cook what was wanted, and with a hint as to the quarter in which he would be the most likely to find the gentleman needed, Barney scuffled away in haste.

At his rap, Sparkler Steve opened the door, and with a low ejaculation Barney slipped inside, grinning all over his face at sight of his employer, dressed and sitting up, looking very unlike a corpse.

"Lorella—you have news?" cried Kirkwood, eagerly, mistaking that look, quite naturally.

"Niver a news, sor—bad luck to me-silf foor havin' to say that same, faith!" reluctantly replied the Irishman. "'Tis you that's wanted, Misther Sparkle. The docther says that divil av a Cr-rooks—ow-wow! but he's got a moighty nate little girrul av his own, begorra!"

"Talk a string, Barney, if you never did before in your life," sternly spoke the Sport, gripping an arm as further reminder. "What about Crooks and the doctor?"

"He sint me foor you, sor; tall-on-end in a hoory, faith! Sid Oi was to fitch yees wid me av Oi had to play ye was a pig in a poke, sure! An' the girrul was insoide, thayre, wid ahl av her—"

"His daughter? Has she come?"

"I'll go with you, Mr. Starlight," said Martin Kirkwood, rising to his feet and reaching toward the cane which stood against the head of his bed. "It may be possible that this Crooks can tell something more concerning the Strangers, and that is—"

"No, sor; jist the wan, sor; an' that same's this gintleman, sor!" Barney hurriedly spluttered, clutching an arm as though he would fairly drag the Sport out of that chamber.

And then, in a husky whisper, the camp-cook added for Starlight's sole benefit:

"Don't lit him folly yees, sor! Sure, an' it's ahl a divil av a mix, but on me sowl 'tis Barney O'Shea faals did-sure that his own sisther's son is the woorst av the whole haape, begorra!"

If the Sparkler had been wholly in ignorance as to the suspicions entertained by the Irishman, this confused whisper might well have puzzled rather than given him fresh light; but, as it was, he caught the right cue, and promptly acted upon it.

A deft push sent Barney outside the chamber; then he turned to lift a checking hand, speaking gravely:

"Excuse me, Mr. Kirkwood, but I must

ask you to remain here for the present. Dr. Potter sent for me alone. Should you come, too, Crooks might be frightened and refuse to open his lips. You comprehend?"

The old gentleman felt disappointed, and his face plainly betrayed as much; but he had grown fairly collected by this time, and accepted the situation with fair grace.

"If there is anything you ought to know, sir, be sure I'll keep you posted," added the Sport, then leaving the chamber to answer that summons.

Barney O'Shea kept close at his heels, and was only kept from entering in Starlight's company by the prompt action of Dr. Potter, who not only barred the way, but shoved the camp-cook bodily back while blandly speaking:

"That's all right, Paddy. Many thanks until you're better paid."

"But, sor—"

"Butter not, my dear fellow," smilingly punned the man of medicine, as he withdrew his head and shoulders, then closed the door squarely in that mortified face.

Barney muttered something which could hardly have been a blessing or a prayer, then bent over until—

The door quickly swung partly open, Dr. Potter showing in the crack, smiling maliciously as O'Shea jumped away with awkward celerity.

"Dropped something, didn't you, Paddy? Well, pick it up while I'm looking at you, please, for I'm constitutionally nervous and should I happen to hear anybody or anything astir near this keyhole—well, do you know, it's rather more than even odds I shoot?"

"Yis, sor—no, sor—divil a wan o' me, sor—ow-wow!" spluttered Barney, beating a retreat in utter confusion, without stopping to hunt further for what he might have dropped there.

Barney passed down-stairs, nervously restless. He saw Ralph Innes just entering the dining-room, evidently to await the delayed breakfast which he had now ordered.

But burning curiosity proved too strong for the amateur detective to long resist, and, while doubting the man of medicine and his "patent pill machine," O'Shea soon after crept back up-stairs, tiptoeing toward that door beyond which he felt firmly assured such momentous revelations were even then coming to light.

A shot through the panel would prove awkward enough, but just then Barney was willing to run his chances for the sake of learning just how far his suspicions were founded upon truth; and not for an instant did he doubt that such information was lying in yonder, provided he could only get at it.

And so first, with eye to keyhole, (baffled by the key remaining in lock,) then with ear substituted, the camp-cook listened with bated breath, at first showing disappointment on his eager face.

But then, as Nelson Crooks spoke further, that expression changed to one of fierce delight, and Barney glued his ear to the keyhole in his eagerness not to lose even one syllable of—

He knew it! From the very outset he knew that Ralph Innes was at the bottom of this foul outrage!

Then, when physical faintness caused the wounded mountaineer to break short off, Barney rose erect and stole away as noiselessly as lay in his power.

For one thing, he had heard quite enough to confirm his belief in the guilt of the private secretary. For another, he knew not how soon Dr. Potter might take action, either by turning knob or picking trigger for a shot through the door itself!

"Ah-ha, ye murtherin' divil, yees!" muttered Barney O'Shea, as he reached the head of the stairs and paused there to take a hasty look at his big revolver before venturing further. "Bloind the oyes av ahl yees loike, faith, but niver a bloind will yees bloind thim av Barney

O'Shea, bedad! Ah-ha, thin! Wait ahn'til the hoorn av destruction blows, me jewel, an' it's Barney O'Shea will foor-nish the wind foor that saame foine jig, begorra!"

Satisfied that his rather antiquated weapon (of the obsolete ball-and-cap pattern) would not fail him when called upon, Barney hastily made his way down stairs on business bent, his face ruddy with tingling blood, his little eyes glowing as though backed by living fire.

Feeling firmly convinced that Ralph Innes was guilty past all question, the camp-cook determined to bring matters to a head without further waste of time.

Barney felt fairly certain he would find his intended prey still at the table in the long dining-room, and so turned his steps in that direction, right hand on pistol-butt, but awkwardly disguising his warlike intentions, lest he be barred by others ere he could fairly get in his fine work.

Nothing happened to bar his passage, however, and as he opened the door leading from the hallway to the dining-room, Barney caught sight of Ralph Innes still at table, though now leaning back in his chair like one whose healthy appetite had been fairly satisfied for the time being.

Only one sleepy-looking waiter was in the room, as a swift glance assured the camp-cook, and then Barney drew his weapon to cover his man, at the same time calling forth in stern tones:

"Howld up yer hands, ye divil, or Oi'll blow yees t'rough! Faith, an' 'tis Barney O'Shea hes got yees loined—augh-yough!"

Ralph Innes turned swiftly at that address, giving a sharp ejaculation as he saw what he was doing; but ere he could take further action a cry escaped Barney, and the revolver barked savagely!

CHAPTER XXII.

NELSON CROOKS BEGINS A CONFESSION.

When the Sparkler Sport slipped inside the door of the chamber where the wounded mountaineer was lying, he glanced first at the bed, to see that its present occupant was seemingly asleep.

Then he removed his hat, bowing silently to Kittie Crooks, whom he knew fairly well by sight, although their acquaintance had been but little more than passing.

Kittie responded in kind, then Dr. Potter spoke in professionally modulated tones:

"He insisted on sending for you, Mr. Starlight, although I could have wished him more strength for the—"

A stir upon the bed drew all eyes that way, and then Nelson Crooks feebly lifted his head the better to see what was going on.

Instantly Kittie lent him the needed support, in a whisper telling him the gentleman asked for had just arrived.

"I want—here!"

"What can I do for you, Mr. Crooks?" gently asked the Sport, moving nearer the bed and touching one of those unusually cold hands as it lay outside the cover.

"I want—where is he?"

"Whom do you wish to see?"

"I thought—he isn't—the stick saved him, sir?"

A ray of light seemed to flash across one perplexing mystery, but Starlight felt this was no moment in which to talk about comparative trifles, and so asked, instead:

"Is it Mr. Kirkwood you wish to see, sir? If so—"

Just then it was that Dr. Potter sprung his little trap so adroitly upon Barney O'Shea, resulting in that worthy's hasty retreat to lower regions. And so it came to pass that, after a few more words, the Sparkler Sport comprehended what the invalid really wished.

"All right, Mr. Crooks," he said, un-

derstandingly. "I'll go fetch Mr. Kirkwood. I know he will be willing to come, if only because—"

"I want to tell—all!"

As bearer of this message, Starlight left the chamber and hurried back to where he had left the capitalist, quickly making known the reason for his returning so much sooner than anticipated.

"He's in a bad way, I'm afraid," the Sparkler took occasion to say by way of caution. "I'm pretty sure he knows something well worth listening to, but—treat him as leniently as you can, I beg."

"If he is one of those demons—"

"Give him a living show, at least," urged Starlight. "If not for himself, because of his daughter, who is suffering far more than her father ever can."

Seeing that he would save time by giving way, if only in seeming, Martin Kirkwood gave the desired promise; then the two men left that chamber to hasten across to the other, where Dr. Potter was on watch to admit them as quietly as might be.

Deeming it wisest to do the first talking himself, the Sparkler pushed ahead of his companion, bending over the wounded man, face and voice full of sympathy which was a tonic in themselves.

But Kittie Crooks was equally prompt to act, and almost before Martin Kirkwood could fairly take in his surroundings, the girl caught one of his hands in hers, pressing it feverishly while murmuring, huskily:

"Oh, sir, spare him! Bear with him kindly, if you can, for he is all I have left me—all I have to love or to care for! If you hope for mercy when your own time comes, Mr. Kirkwood, show pity here and now!"

"I don't—what is it—that is—"

The old gentleman hardly knew just what he was trying to say, and Kittie never knew what words did cross his lips.

"Pity him, sir! Daddy means to do right—he will make all the amends which lie in his power. He never thought what—he was led astray by evil men, but now—oh, sir, do not bear too hardly upon him!"

Just then Nelson Crooks called out her name, and, bending her head low enough to drop a trembling kiss upon the hand she held, Kittie turned to the bedside, kneeling there with one hand slipped beneath that head, to comfort or to assist as best she might.

This change permitted the wounded mountaineer to see Martin Kirkwood, and that he had caught his daughter's plea was made evident by his first words, feeble-sounding, yet clear and distinctly pronounced.

"That's jest what I'm wantin' to do, sir; make sech amends as I kin fer playin' wuss than the fool—wuss than ary fool!"

Sparkler stepped further aside, at the same time deftly gripping a hand in significant reminder, lest the hot-tempered old gentleman permit his feelings to carry away his cooler judgment.

Mr. Kirkwood nodded slightly, but looked at Kittie instead of at the Sport. What might have been denied the father might be granted such a daughter as this.

"Cut it short as you can, Crooks," warned the physician; but the injured man shook his head impatiently, saying:

"Gi' me more o' that stuff, doctor. No use; I'm g'wine to say the hull blamed thing. So make it as easy fer me—ef easy ye kin!"

Seemingly against his better judgment, Dr. Potter yielded, administering a draught which was but a few minutes in producing the desired effect.

Kittie held the glass which contained the potion. Her hand tenderly wiped those lips after. And her great eyes mutely appealed to Martin Kirkwood for pity, for mercy, for comfort in her sore distress.

As the draught lent him strength, Nelson Crooks spoke on, proving himself something of a man at bottom, in spite

of the weak will which had yielded to evil example, if not evil advice.

He frankly admitted his wrong-doing. He declared his perfect readiness to stand the full penalty of his deeds. But then his voice grew softer, his haggard face milder, his words less steady as he put in a plea for—not himself, but his little girl!

"Tain't so mighty much matter what comes to me; I hain't wuth worryin' over; but thar's my gal—good es ever drewed the breath o' life, ef it is a wuthless ole cuss as says so!"

"Daddy—don't talk so, dear daddy!" murmured Kittie, laying her soft cheek against his rough beard, while hot tears blinded her eyes.

"You hesh, honey. I'm got to say jest that, or I don't say what mo' these gents is wantin' so mighty bad to hear of; yes, now, I be!"

"Let your father say what he wishes, Miss Crooks," whispered Martin Kirkwood, in tones marvelously gentle for him.

"Thar, thar, honey," muttered the mountaineer. "You jest hold hesh, Kittie, or they'll done shet ye outside whar yoh cain't see nur hear. An' so I'm tellin' of ye, gents, all: 'Tain't fer me, but fer her, jest fer her, that I'm axin' favors."

"She hain't never tuck no part in these yer dirty jobs. She's done all ary gal knowed how fer to make her mis'-able ole pap walk a chalk; but he was sech a fool that he couldn't—no, he jest couldn't, now!"

"Time an' time all over ag'in, Kittie hyar would scold an' pray fer me—why, gents, hope may die ef it wasn't her prayin' over thar to our shack, when she reckoned I was sleepin' like a wet log—"

"Father—don't!"

"You hesh, honey! An' she a-prayin' to the good Lord that her mis'-able ole cuss of a daddy mought come to see the dirty ways he was a-tromplin' into, an' then—"

Again Kittie tried to check her father, but, while giving her a kiss in turn, Nelson Crooks pushed her face far enough aside to speak on:

"An' me all the time wide-awake with the two eyes o' me shet! An' then—waal, gents, that was the turnin' p'int, fer me. I swore into the mind o' me, then, that I'd come over yer to Salvation an' blow the hull pesky thing! I swore I'd break off with them cussed Strangers—"

In spite of himself, Martin Kirkwood gave an exclamation at this, leaning forward with eyes all aglow, to say sternly: "The Strangers? Then you did take part in the foul outrage which lost me my daughter, my son?"

"I did, more fool me," doggedly confessed the wounded mountaineer, his lids drooping as though he could not bear to meet those fiery eyes. "I won't tell no mo' lies over it, sir. An' ef thar's 'nough o' me left fer to pay out, hyar I am, ready fer to take what comes a'ter sech work. Pay me off, ef it takes hide and taller, too, sir!"

With a catch in her breath which was almost a sob, Kittie Crooks turned that way, debarred from rising erect by that living weight upon her hand and wrist, yet losing nothing in dignity through that, as she spoke to all, yet to Martin Kirkwood alone.

"Father spoke of pity, of sympathy, of aid and comfort for me, his only living child, gentlemen. Now—listen to his daughter, please!"

"Whatever punishment may be measured forth to Nelson Crooks must be shared with Kittie, his daughter! His fate shall be mine, for good or evil! And now—strike, if you can find it in your hearts, gentlemen—strike, but through me first!"

Not so very much as to words, but with action added—little was lacking, and even Martin Kirkwood involuntarily bowed his head before that beautiful

face; for Kittie was more than pretty just then.

A brief silence; then it was broken by Nelson Crooks.

"Thar hain't so mighty much more to say, sir, but what they is—it runs pretty much like this yer."

"I never rightly knowed jest how nasty bad the game was, ontel I'd waded in clean past the breathin' lips o' me. Then it was swim or swaller, an'—waal, I done the best I knowed how."

"You were with the gang that raided my camp, then?" asked Martin Kirkwood, with forced composure; not so much for sake of the man, as for his daughter.

"Yes. I was thar. I never knowed—but I done said that much afo', didn't I, sir?"

"Yes, but—you helped do the evil work, all the same!"

The wounded man roused up a bit more at this, huskily saying:

"Yes, I done lent a helpin' hand, sir, but—fer why? How did you miss gittin' choked over the range? Jest so; an' I was the critter as resked his own life fer you: I put that stick inside the noose!"

CHAPTER XXIII.

WHO WAS THE PRIME MOVER?

Not one of those present anticipated such a statement as this, and of them all Martin Kirkwood showed the greatest degree of surprise.

"You did that?" he asked, quickly, moving a bit nearer the bed. "I thought—then it wasn't an accident?"

"'Twas the best I knowed how, jest then, an' that was pore enough," said the wounded mountaineer, head moving restlessly in spite of that loving support.

"It saved a life; for that be thankful," gravely cut in the Sparkler Sport.

"I am thankful," declared Martin Kirkwood, his tone softening a bit as he spoke on; "but I'd feel far more grateful if the same assistance could have been offered my children! I am old and played out. I count for nothing, while they are—"

He broke off, feeling that he was permitting his emotions to win the upper hand, bearing in mind the pledge Starlight had extracted from him before entering that chamber.

For reasons of his own the sport wished to encourage the man, and mainly for that reason he spoke again:

"'Twas a brave action, any way, Mr. Crooks. If those demons had so much as suspected you, 'twould have cost your life as well."

"I know. I was thinkin' that same way my own self," muttered Nelson Crooks. "An'—thar was Kittie, hyar!"

"Never mind me, Daddy," soothingly whispered the girl, lightly passing a damp cloth over his fevered brows.

"An' that was the way it all come 'round, sirs. Before heaven I never knowed 'twas gwine to be sech dirt; never knowed thar was ary wuss into it all then jest a slap-dash in an' out fer boodle. They lied to me—lied like houn'-dogs!"

"Mind ye, gents; I hain't sayin' of all this jest to help my own self out of a nasty hobble. I've ketched my dose—I kin take what-all comes fer the rest of it. But I'm tryin' to tell the straight way to it all; ef I die fer it"

Dr. Potter frowned anxiously, shaking his head as he looked on. His professional instinct was sadly outraged by all this; yet, what more could he do?

Nelson Crooks turned his head to look Martin Kirkwood more squarely in the face, speaking on in clearer if not calmer tones:

"You know the wust of it all hy this, stranger. You know that I was in the nasty mix, right or wrong. An'—why didn't I help the kids instead o' you?"

"If you only had!"

"Which I couldn't, sir, nur they didn't need it so turrible bad, nuther," earnest-

ly declared the injured mountaineer. "They wasn't no harm comin' thar way, but you—the rope!"

"That was part of the game, then, Crooks?" asked Starlight.

"Sure! An' yit—gospel truth!—I never knowed ontel we was right thar in full sight o' the camp! An' then—what could ary one pore devil do? Thar was them tetchin' shoulders with me which'd shore jab a knife 'twixt the short ribs o' me at the fust kick!"

"One of 'em was Pete Peltz; you know him, gents? An' he 'twas who let it out, fust-off; help me Moses ef I don't reckon he was lookin' fer me to kick over the tugs right then! An' his knife ready fer to clap a stopper on ef I did!"

Martin Kirkwood looked just a bit puzzled by all this, and even Sparkler Steve seemed to take it as more raving than sober truth, since he spoke again, half-doubtingly:

"How so, Crooks? Surely the raid was made for plunder alone?"

A faint smile came into that haggard face, only to fade again as quickly. His head moved from side to side to emphasize his reply:

"Not so, sir: 'twas murder, pure an' simple!"

"Afterward, yes, but surely not at the send-off?"

"From the jump-off. I know—now! I didn't think it, then. Ef I hed—but whar's the use talkin'? I played dog to start with, an' I hed to run on fer a dog's finish—like this!"

Again did Dr. Potter interpose, urging his patient to let the matter drop right where it was for the present, since he could work no good, and was surely injuring his own chances for ultimate recovery.

Kittie ventured to add a whisper to the same effect, but the result was the same. Nelson Crooks had set for himself a task, and would not rest easy until the goal was fairly won.

"I'm stronger then ye reckon, Doc," he declared, forcing a smile which certainly failed to fetch answer in kind from those who heard and saw. "It takes a powerful sight o' sickness to down a dog, an' this one is so tough—"

Kittie checked his bitter mockery with her trembling lips, but as soon as she moved again, her father spoke on:

"That was pritty nigh the way it all come 'round, gents; we crup up to whar we hed the hull 'rangement kivered, then word was passed how we wanted to wind 'er all up. An' then—that was the fust I knowed fer shore 'twas ary mo' then a raid fer boodle!"

"Who gave the orders, Crooks?" asked the Sparkler Sport, deeming it high time to expedite matters, if only for the injured man's sake. "Who, and why?"

A half-covert glance toward Martin Kirkwood, then Kittie's father spoke on, more hurriedly:

"Wait a mite, ef ye kin, sir. Fust—why I didn't do more then I did. I wanted to, but—how could I? Thar was them as held me kivered, an' I knowed so much 'thout ary tellin'. An' so—waal, we downed you, sir, whar the tent sort o' made a darkness, an' then—I jest run the resk, an' she come out on top!"

"It was the deed of a brave man, let who will say aught against the rest of it," earnestly declared Starlight. "I helped release Mr. Kirkwood from that noose. I saw just how it was arranged, and while I then believed the stick came through a lucky accident, I knew its being there surely saved his life."

Kittie gave a subdued sob at this. Nelson drew a long breath, face betraying something of relief the while.

"I hoped it mought, but I couldn't be shore. 'Twas all done in a rush, an' then Pete Peltz twisted the rope so turrible f'erce! Ef I'd seed even a half-chance, gents, I'd 'a' downed him then, fer good an' all."

"If you only had, this hurt would

have been spared you, I verily believe," declared Starlight.

"Yes, I know. I couldn't sw'ar to him of my own eyesight, but I know he downed me," muttered the mountaineer.

So far Martin Kirkwood had acted with wonderful repression for a man of his imperious will and fiery temper. This came in part through the promise won in advance by Starlight Steve, but even more because he had been so strongly and so favorably impressed by this man's daughter.

But now he gave way, pouring forth a flood of questions which demanded answers without evasion, and to some of which even the Sparkler Sport gave an uneasy frown, holding the suspicions he did.

If the whole truth was to be told now, how would it affect this old man? Would he believe, or would he denounce the speaker as a liar?

"I know, sir," said Crooks, his voice a bit less even. "It's your right to hev the hull yarn spread out afore ye, but—"

"Go on, please. Tell me the rest. Who bade you strangle me and—my children?"

"No, no, not them!" quickly amended the wounded criminal, shaking his head to add emphasis to the denial. "Jest you. An' the cook. The rope fer you two, an' we was to make mighty shore work of it all! An' then we was to ketch an' tote off the rest; the gal, an' her brother."

"You are sure? That was the plan to be carried out?"

"Yes. Jest that-a-way, sir. Strangle you two, an' tote off the young critters fer furdur 'structions," promptly and decidedly repeated Nelson Crooks.

"Why?" persisted Kirkwood, evidently bent on probing the matter to the very bottom.

Crooks hesitated, like one hardly knowing the safest way out of an awkward corner. Then he said, slowly, significantly:

"Waal, now, I hain't so turrible shore as to jest why, sir, but ef you was to ax who—"

"What do you mean by that? Surely you cannot—"

The Sparkler Sport was swifter to catch that veiled meaning, and in clear tones spoke again.

"Go on, Crooks. You have said too much not to finish. Who was it at the bottom of this ugly affair, please?"

"Yes; tell me that—if you really know!" added Kirkwood.

"Waal, sir, it's not so easy to talk o' sech things, but—thar was one o' your own party at the bottom of it all!"

"What?" ejaculated the millionaire, giving a start and passing a hand quickly across his face as he gazed wide-eyed at the mountaineer. "You surely can't mean—what is it you do mean, anyway?"

"Jest what I'm tryin' to tell ye, sir," said Crooks, earnestly. "Ef I knowed—what I'm thinkin' is mighty nigh true—ef I knowed this yer was to be my death-bed, sir, I'd say it jest like this:

"The hull job was planned an' 'ranged fer by somebody who was with your own party. He stuck out fer you to be roped, an' he said fer the others to be tuck like—"

"Impossible!"

"But gospel truth, all the same," declared Crooks, doggedly, shoving away his daughter as Kittie strove to calm him. "Ef not, why would I be addin' to my own trouble jest fer sayin' so?"

"But—one of our party?" muttered the old man, bewilderedly.

"Shore as you're standin' right thar, sir! I know. I hated to say it, fer I knowed how mighty tough it'd come down onto the feelin's of ye, but—it's gospel truth, all the same."

"One of—why, man! There was only Lorella, Allen, Ralph—"

"That's the fust name of your nevvie, sir?"

"Ralph Innes, the son of my dead sister, yes. But surely you—"

"He's the man who hired you killed an' the kids stole off, sir!"

CHAPTER XXIV.

FACING AN UGLY CHARGE.

This astonishing assertion had in goodly measure been anticipated by all present, with the single exception of Martin Kirkwood, although all of them were not ready to place full credence in the damning charge.

The old gentleman was half-stunned, and showed as much, but the Sparkler Sport shook his head decidedly, and Kittie gave a low protest, even while bowing her head to lay her hot cheek against the face of her father.

"No, no, daddy! Don't say that! It is not—it surely must be a cruel mistake, for Mr. Innes could never—"

"Who else could it 'a' bin, then?" almost angrily asked the mountaineer, that tinge of color in his haggard face only too plainly betraying how serious a drain was being placed upon his remnant of vitality.

Dr. Potter would have interfered, but Starlight checked him with a strong hand, saying sternly:

"Not now, doctor. After this the matter can't be put over. It must be proven, one way or the other. You can see that much, surely?"

"Yes, only—it's killing the man by inches!"

"And it's damning another man by rods! We'll hurry it over as fast as possible, but—you can't chip in here, doctor."

So much, then the Sparkler Sport came more to the front, taking a feverish hand within his own, speaking gravely, soberly, kindly.

"Of course, we all know you believe just what you've been saying, Mr. Crooks, but surely there is a sad mistake being made?"

"The maker isn't me, then, sir," quickly retorted the mountaineer.

"Not willfully, of course. None of us would for a moment believe that of you. But you admit having been deceived as to the real object of that raid, and so—"

"What I know, I know, all the same."

"Did you see or hear Ralph Innes make any such bargain with the Chief of the Strangers, sir?"

Crooks was less ready with an answer, but then it came.

"Waal, not jest that way, sir, but I done hear'n the boys talkin' it all over when the job was jobbed. An' so—who else could it 'a' bin, sir? Fer that 'twas one o' the outfit, is too mighty plain fer denyin'!"

"Unless it was just talk with a purpose," shrewdly guessed the Sparkler Sport. "Merely to throw you all off the right scent."

"Why so? Wasn't we all alike over in the mud?"

"Yes, but there may have been reasons which you fellows knew nothing at all about. I'd sooner think that way than to believe Mr. Innes would play so vile a part."

Kittie flashed a grateful look toward the speaker, and Martin Kirkwood caught a hand to press it warmly.

"I thank you, sir, in the name of my dead sister. I couldn't believe anything like that of her boy. And yet—it's black—all a bitter black mystery which is—nearly murdering me!"

Nelson Crooks looked and listened, showing a degree of vitality which fairly amazed his physician.

He said nothing, while the others were speaking, but he shook his head doggedly as those eyes came his way once more.

"I hain't no object to win in sayin' ary sech, gents, but I cain't help stickin' to it. Thar wasn't no foolishin' so fur. The game was planned in your own camp, sir; and sech bein' so, who else could 'a' done it 'cept him as you've called by name?"

"You surely wouldn't hang a man

without first letting him make a defense, Mr. Crooks?" asked the Sport.

"No. But—"

"All right! Mr. Innes has returned, and I reckon I can find him by looking. I'll fetch him up here, where both sides of the story can be heard. Better clear up everything as we jog along; don't you think so, Mr. Kirkwood?"

"Yes, yes; find Ralph and bring him here. I can't think—and yet, if it should prove to be so!"

"It shortly will, then!" declared Crooks.

"Daddy, dear," murmured Kittie, kissing those too impetuous lips once more. "I know you believe it all, but—I hope and trust there is some cruel mistake! Mr. Innes would never—"

"You done hesh, honey. What you know 'bout that feller?"

Starlight did not linger to hear more, but, leaving the chamber, ran lightly down stairs, turning as by instinct toward the dining room, from whence just then issued harsh notes; those of Barney O'Shea, as he covered the astonished secretary with a rusty forty-five!

There was no time for delay, and Sparkler Steve sprung forward on the instant, grasping Barney's arm and forcing his hand upward, just as his revolver barked: to waste its lead on the ceiling above.

"Quiet, you ass! Steady, Innes!" cried Starlight, all in a breath, at the same time "giving the foot" to Barney, tripping him up and fetching him to the floor with a crash.

"Is the fellow drunk, or only crazy?" cried Ralph, coming that way in haste, while the startled waiter ducked below one of the tables, taking thought of his own safety first of all.

Barney was too nearly breathless to reply or to deny, and Sparkler Sport first looked to disarming the camp-cook, lest he make still worse use of his tools. After that he said briskly:

"It's all a mistake, of course. Barney wouldn't hurt a fly if he knew it, and as for you—I say, Johnny Hash-slinger!"

The waiter lifted his head warily, but then emerged from his place of refuge on seeing the absence of ball or blade.

"Just a joke; you can tell 'em how 'twas," added the Sport, as a crumpled bill flew across to where the waiter was now standing. "An accident to wind up with, but nobody hurt. And—Barney?"

"Yis, sor. Oi niver—divil a bit did Oi iver, sor!" spluttered O'Shea, thoroughly bewildered by that heavy fall.

"Of course you never. How could you? And now, Barney, take a walk in the open air. Go cool off a bit. Don't hurry back. We will try to worry along without you for—well, call it until supper time, unless a messenger comes after you before that. Understand?"

At least the crestfallen detective obeyed, making no answer to the many questions with which he was pelted while making his way to the exit. And the Sparkler Sport easily turned aside curiosity by declaring that no trouble had arisen; merely the dropping of an old gun from an imperfect scabbard—nothing worse.

Then he moved away toward the upper regions, Innes following in obedience to a signal, which he quickly understood.

Neither man spoke until they reached the upper landing, and were safe from being overheard. Then Ralph asked:

"What is it, Mr. Starlight? Something has gone wrong again?"

"Nothing more than can be made right again, unless I'm widely off my base. I'd say more, but others might think me taking an unfair advantage. So—you understand?"

Possibly the secretary turned a trifle paler, but if so, there was no other change to be noted, and his tones were even and clear as he spoke in turn:

"I fancy I do. All right. I ask no favors, least of all such as you are now hinting at, Mr. Starlight."

"I'd feel 'twas an insult to myself fully as much as to you, sir."

"Thanks. Which way now, please?"

"My old room. You'll find it pretty full, but it's like an omnibus in that respect—room for another."

Sparkler Steve seemed trying to make light of the matter, but Ralph Innes failed to respond in like manner. He surely felt it was earnest enough, and his face showed cold and grave as he entered that chamber.

A keen, brief-lived gaze, then Martin Kirkwood extended a hand. Ralph drew back a bit, shaking his head, soberly.

"Not right now, sir. Later on, if you will, but for now: What am I wanted for, please?"

"To look at part o' your dirty work" harshly cried Nelson Crooks, starting up in bed, but as quickly replaced by his daughter.

"My work, Mr. Crooks? Surely you can't think that I harmed you, like this? I was not near town when—"

"Ef not by your own hand, then it come through your dirty doin's," persisted the mountaineer. "Shorely you cain't deny that?"

"I can and I do. How did I ever injure you, please?"

"By settin' them devils on to jump the camp, over yender. You know you done jest that, don't ye?"

"I? Never. Are you going crazy, man alive?"

If acting, this was letter-perfect. But Crooks remained unshaken in his belief, putting his charges in still plainer speech, declaring that Ralph Innes, and he alone, was at the bottom of all this sore trouble.

"You done hired the camp jumped. You said fer the old gent to be strangled, 'long of the cook to make it more bindin'. You swore 'em all to make a clean job, an' to tote off the younger 'uns. An' me; look at me, now, will ye?"

"All this comes o' my gittin' mixed up with them devils, an' takin' part in the raid planned by you. This—this is my pay fer it all."

Nelson Crooks pushed Kittie aside as she strove to calm him, raising up in bed and spreading his arms widely, nodding his head as though to the more surely call attention to the reddened bandages over his partly exposed chest.

With a low cry of vexed apprehension, Dr. Potter pushed to the bedside, and between them Crooks was lowered to his pillow once more.

Ralph Innes showed no particular emotion at this fierce outburst, but that may have been because his nerves had been braced from the outset, and his face already as pale as it well could be.

Still, those fierce words had their effect, and that was deepened as the wounded man again cried out:

"Ef I die fer my part, cuss you, shorely you ought to pull hemp fer yours, Ralph Innes."

"And hang he shall, unless he can show cleaner hands than I think" came a stern voice from the then opening door of that chamber.

CHAPTER XXV.

HARD WORDS TO SWALLOW.

Allen Kirkwood cut very little time to waste after leaving the temporary camp of the Strangers, and it was he who urged the accompanying outlaw forward, rather than the contrary.

There were not many words lavished between messenger and escort, and none at all which require record in this connection, at least while the earlier portion of that journey lasted.

The burly ruffian detailed by Jack Ketch to keep the young man company, apparently considered himself simply a sort of check upon Kirkwood to prevent his sneaking back to play spy upon the Strangers, as well as to guide him to Salvation City by the most practicable route.

It was still quite early in the morning when the two men came to where their

first glimpse of Salvation might be caught, and not until then was rein drawn for a halt.

"Mebbe it don't call fer ary sech, stranger," said the escort in gruff tones, a detaining hand upon the nearest arm of his present companion. "Mebbe the boss done said it all to ye. But, aryhow, I'm tellin' ye jest so much: Play clean white from this time on, or you'll shore ketch heap sight the wust of it all."

"Of course I'll play white, as you call it," surlily retorted the messenger, shaking off that touch as though he deemed it poisonous. "Why wouldn't I, then?"

"Why is they sech blame fools let live on, boss?"

"You'd ought to know, if any one."

"That's all right, stranger, ef ye only think so. But I'll keep on sayin' what I sot out fer to chin-chin, which comes pritty much like this yer way:

"The boss done giv' you a job to git over. Thar's the place it's got to take start from, nur you don't need tellin' who or whar to look at fust. But don't you let one thing slip the memory of ye—which is that thar'll be plenty o' mighty keen eyes takin' note o' all ye do an' say, with jest as shore han's layin' back of 'em, ready fer to put the kibosh on both you an' the tricks you may be big fool 'nough fer to reckon ye kin set up onto the boss or the rest o' us; savvy that?"

"I'd be as big a liar as you seem to be ass, Johnny, if I told you I loved either yourself or your precious outfit, or that I don't mean to play even for all of this nasty work," retorted Kirkwood, showing his teeth in a queer sort of half-smile, half-frown, staring the while into the masked face, as though seeking some clew by which to identify his escort in the time to come.

"That goes without saying, but until this exchange is fairly effected, I'll work as hard for that end as Jack Ketch himself could do. After that—well, that's another story."

Without pausing for reply or retort, Allen Kirkwood sent his horse forward at a rapid pace, now bent on reaching Salvation City as quickly as possible.

The clatter of hoofs caused him to look around, a few minutes later, but the horse so recently ridden by the Strangler, and which now came to its mate with a little whimper, was unburdened; both man and saddle had disappeared.

For a little while Allen felt thoroughly puzzled by this, but then he concluded that the horses must belong at or near Salvation, and recognition of stolen property might be conducive to throat-fever!

The young man took hint from this example, thinking it wisest to keep on the safe side, and as soon as he was fairly at the edge of Salvation City, he dismounted, turning the animal loose with its mate, trusting them to find their way to their regular quarters unaided, should his shrewd suspicions prove founded on fact.

This done, he hastened as directly as possible to the Midway Hotel, feeling assured that he could find a clew there, even if he failed to meet with his father, there domiciled.

During their stay in camp over in yonder cosy valley, each member of the party had paid more or less frequent visits to the mining town, hence Allen experienced no difficulty at all in locating the hotel.

As he turned the corner, coming fairly upon the hotel, Allen smothered a little cry, for there, in front of the building, stood a figure which had not its counterpart in all that region; the shape of Barney O'Shea, the Yankified Irish camp-cook.

Recognition was mutual, and with a broad grin chasing away his dark scowl, Barney came shambling up, both hands extended in a hearty greeting.

"Augh-yaugh! 'Tis a soight foor sore oyes, thin, Masther Allin! An' divil a glad was Oi iver so glad in the whole loife av me befoor—an' that's no loie,

mayther! Ow-wow! 'Tis yersilf, thin, Masther Allin?"

"Don't that feel like it, Barney?" half-laughed the young man, as his fingers closed in a grip which caused those bony digits to crack and snap in every joint.

At any other time Barney might well have let forth a howl of pain and cry for mercy, but just now his excitement was far too great for any heed to be paid seeming trifles, and so he spluttered on:

"Faith, sor, an' 'tis the iligant good-luck that brings ye hayer the marnin', thin! An' that murtherin' divil blatherin' 'em ahl over wid his dirty loies! An' the ould masther takin' it ahl in four truth an' gospel by the pick—ow-wow!"

"Who is it, Barney?" harshly demanded Allen, gripping an arm and giving it an ugly shake. "Not—surely not Ralph Innes?"

"Thot same, sor! An' him full to the moozle wid loies! An' him—"

"Talk a string, you infernal ass!" harshly commanded young Kirkwood, eyes all aglow with a dangerous light. "Where are they, and what's going on? Boil it down, but don't leave anything out which—talk, you fool!"

This Barney did, as well as he could, and from a mass of chaff Kirkwood extracted at least a few sound kernels.

O'Shea held a hot grudge against both Innes and Starlight, and one who did not know the camp-cook pretty accurately, might have found a serious difficulty in judging just which one of the two parties denounced was the greater criminal.

Among the rest Allen learned that a sort of seance was even then being held in the Midway, and fearing to lose more time, he shook Barney off, entering the hotel and running swiftly upstairs.

It seemed a matter of instinct rather than reason or of previous information, for Allen made no mistake in the room, pausing without that closed door barely long enough to catch the correct cue, then flinging the barrier wide to cross the threshold as he sternly cried out:

"And hang he shall, unless he can show cleaner hands than I think!"

A greater surprise could scarcely have sprung upon the company there assembled, and for a brief space all was confusion.

Martin Kirkwood lost his forced composure, catching the hands of his son and asking after Lorella, for the first few moments believing that the Strangers had lost their valuable prey through a miraculous escape.

Allen quickly banished this glad fancy, however, and there was a dangerous glow in his black eyes as they fixed upon the pale face of his cousin, the private secretary.

Again he said, harshly:

"Yes, you infernal scoundrel! Show clean hands, or I'll run you up a tree without the trouble of using your feet in climbing! I'll hang you, just so sure as grass grows and waters run!"

"By what right do you use such language, Cousin Allen?" began Ralph, in expostulation; but the other young man swiftly cut his speech short.

"Drop that, you cur! You're no relative of mine. You're no kin to the Kirkwood family so long as your record is black as midnight!"

A hot flush came into that handsome face, and the secretary put both hands behind his back, as though fighting against a hot temptation to make a far different use of them.

"What have you to say against my record, Allen? As heaven hears my words, I've never committed an act which could rightly call forth such terms as you've made use of, just now."

"Do you deny having—bah!" with clenched hand flying out in a passionate gesture. "Where's the use? You'd deny it all; a man who could join in such an atrocious plot wouldn't make a boggle over a lie more or less!"

Hard words to swallow, surely!

Ralph Innes was a man, whatever his

faults might be. Those words cut him deeply, and that scornful tone stung to the very quick.

"I have never lied to you or to yours, Allen Kirkwood," he forced himself to utter with outward composure. "If you have any charges to bring, why not do so as one gentleman to another, who is—"

"Gentleman? You?" mocked Kirkwood, laughing derisively for a few seconds, then speaking further with fierce emphasis: "That's enough, Ralph Innes. I have charges to make, and I'll fetch them to the front in the proper time and place. Until then—listen, you villain!"

"Until you can prove those charges false in toto, you can't associate with my father. Until then, keep out of our sight and company. Do you understand that much?"

Martin Kirkwood would have spoken, but Allen thrust the old gentleman back, checking whatever speech he might otherwise have made.

As this appeared to be a purely family affair, none of the rest deemed it advisable to interfere, although the Sparkler Sport stood by, keen eyes flashing from face to face, taking mental notes which might prove of use later on in the game.

Ralph Innes kept his temper in admirable check, only his unusually pale face and his strained tones betraying how difficult he found the task. And then he spoke in reply:

"So be it, Allen. Still, the day will surely come when you'll feel sorry for all this. The time shall come when—"

"Is that meant for a threat, Ralph Innes?"

"No. A prediction. Uncle," turning toward Martin Kirkwood and speaking in softened tones, "I never loved you better than right now, nor was I ever more eager to serve you, or yours. At a single word I would give my very life to aid Lorella or—"

"Never mind your worthless life, Ralph Innes," rudely interrupted his cousin, stepping between. "Give us your room instead!"

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE FRIENDS IN COUNCIL.

Ralph Innes hesitated for a little, an almost yearning light in his brown eyes as they rested upon the agitated countenance of his uncle; but no word was spoken such as he longed to hear, and with a long breath which was very nearly a sigh, he spoke again:

"All right. I'll go, now, rather than mix in a quarrel where death may be knocking at the door."

"See that it don't knock at your portal: with a noosed rope in his fist!" almost brutally spoke the younger Kirkwood, whose enmity appeared to grow with the food it fed upon.

At another time he might have found his hands full, for that was anything save a loving look which the secretary flashed his way; but in silence Innes passed over to the doorway, pausing there for a brief look backward.

If he expected or hoped for word of comfort or of kindly parting, he was disappointed. Only Allen spoke, and his words were a thinly veiled menace.

"It's a mighty unhealthy season for traveling, Ralph Innes. If you are meditating a sudden jaunt, don't say that I never told you!"

Without a word of reply, the accused man turned and passed out of sight, paying no heed whatever to Barney O'Shea, who was only held in check by a wholesome fear for his own bones. Only for that the camp-cook would surely have crowded much nearer the front, where he might see as well as hear.

While all this was going on, Dr. Potter was devoting his care and attention to the wounded mountaineer, upon whose already over-tasked powers this excitement was bearing heavily.

As Ralph Innes passed away, those more nearly interested in learning all that could be told anent the Strangers

and their nefarious schemes, naturally turned again to that quarter, eager to pick up the thread dropped at the coming of Allen Kirkwood.

Nelson Crooks seemed willing enough to talk on, but the man of medicine flatly refused to permit any such thing.

"No more, gentlemen; not another word, unless you fire me bodily out of the room and house," was his firm decision. "As a doctor I forbid further chatter. It would be little less than suicidal for Mr. Crooks."

"Ef I'm ready to take the resk, doc?" huskily muttered the man thus named; but Dr. Potter slipped a hand over those lips, while saying:

"If you are, I'm not. Will you go quietly, gentleman, or must I call for assistance in clearing this chamber?"

"If you put it like that doctor—"

"Precisely like that, Mr. Starlight. Will you take the hint?"

"Without the kick? Of course," with a faint smile, at the same time turning toward Kittie and her father, to add:

"Be good to yourselves, friends. Try to chirk him up, little woman. And you, Crooks: make all haste to get back your strength, for—well, we want you to help us do the cheering over the grand round-up, don't you see?"

But the wounded mountaineer shook his head, gloomily, at this.

"I'm hopin' ye'll git thar, sport, but fer me—I'm done ketched my last sickness, an' then—"

Kittie closed those lips with her own, and so they left them; her curly head hiding his, her arms lovingly lending support.

Once outside the sick-chamber, Martin Kirkwood caught an arm of his son, repeating the question which had remained unanswered in so many words during the recent excitement between the cousins.

"Lorella; where is she, Allen?"

"Alive and well, so far as that goes, father. Only—of course she must be—but this isn't the best place in the world to talk over such matters in. Where shall we go, to be by ourselves?"

"I have a room which—this way."

Martin Kirkwood hastened on in advance, Allen close behind him, with the Sparkler Sport coolly fetching up the rear.

Reaching his chamber, the old gentleman turned the knob and opened the door, followed by his son; but as Starlight likewise entered, Allen gave a dark frown and bent a look of strong suspicion upon the intruder.

"I don't—Allen!" began his father, and the young man turned that way, quickly, to hear the further words: "Where is Lorella? Show her to me, boy! Where is she, I say?"

"Not just yet, father. She is safe and sound, though those devils still hold fast to her, and—"

"Still a prisoner? Then—how came you here, boy?" demanded the millionaire, almost harshly, as he caught an arm in his strong grip.

Allen hesitated, once more turning a look as of suspicion upon the Sparkler Sport, who quietly spoke up:

"If I'm at all in the way, gentlemen, I'll take myself out of it. Don't be at all bashful about making known the truth, I beg of you."

"No, no!" cried Martin Kirkwood, hastily, face fully backing up his words as they came in swift succession. "You've played the part of a true and trusty friend so far, Mr. Sparkler. Add to the debt I already owe you, for, heaven knows, we still need just such aid and advice as you best know how to offer. You will remain, friend?"

"With pleasure, since you put it that way. Unless—perhaps your son has some objection, though?"

"Not if my father is satisfied and wishes your company," promptly answered Allen for himself.

This point settled, the chamber door was closed and the key turned in its

lock; then the trio of friends settled down to sober business.

Martin Kirkwood looked as he surely felt—deeply dejected as he realized how little had been won in the desperate game then being played.

Sparkler Steve was more inclined to listen than to assume the lead just now, so Allen Kirkwood had the stage pretty nearly to himself.

He cut the preliminaries as short as he well could, curtly telling how the double abduction had been contrived, and what experience had come their way since that audacious raid.

Like one desirous of lightening a parent's burden as much as possible, he repeated the assurance won from the lips of the sister that Lorella had met with no real insult, had received no bodily injury, and was but little the worse for her unusual experience save through natural anxiety born of her being in bonds and away from her beloved parent.

"Thank God for that, at least!" fervently ejaculated the old gentleman, drawing a long breath of relief and then showing a keener interest in what still remained to be told.

"How did you manage to escape, then, Allen?" he asked.

The young man shrugged his shoulders as his mustached lip took a slight curl, but then made answer, as briefly as possible stating the actual facts of the case.

"The head-devil—Jack Ketch he calls himself—turned me loose with a string attached. Sent me to make known his terms, which you will find pretty fully set down in this paper."

Martin Kirkwood took the note, but his hands trembled and his eyes seemed unusually misty as he put on his glasses. And then, after a low whisper, the Sparkler Sport took the paper and distinctly read aloud all it contained, from address to signature.

"It's a heavy sum, or would be to any common mortal," was his comment as he completed that reading. "Still, it's a mighty low figure to stand as expressing the full value of Miss Kirkwood!"

"I'd give ten times as much rather than have harm befall my little girl!" impulsively cried the father, tears falling as he took the paper and bent his head over that clearly traced signature.

Allen gave a low growl at this, frowning darkly the while.

"It isn't so much the amount, as it is the manner, don't you know?"

"Well, one hardly looks for silk-glove handling when one comes in contact with such gentry," quietly observed the Sparkler Sport.

"That isn't what I mean, either. It's the cash I'm worrying over. A check, or a draft, even, might be managed all right; but when it comes to gathering twenty-five thousand dollars in coin or in bills, 'way out here in the wilderness—that's different!"

"What is it, Allen?" asked his father, lifting his eyes from the lines his daughter had traced.

"Give me the note, father," at the same time taking possession of it without awaiting full permission. "That blinds your eyes, if not your wits, daddy, and just now we need all the help there is going."

"I am ready, son; what is it, first?"

"About this ransom, father."

"I'll pay it. Ten-fold if necessary!"

"I knew you would, father," with a little nod of approval. "But the money isn't all; we've got to hustle for the cash itself. Jack Ketch—Satan build his bed!—declares that he'll take nothing but the clear cash, and that's going to puzzle us, I'm thinking."

"One moment," cut in the Sparkler Sport, nodding to the son, but looking at the father. "You will pay this ransom, then, without disputing the figures, Mr. Kirkwood?"

"Yes. Money or money's worth is nothing to me in comparison with my daughter, sir!"

"As a matter of course. Well, then, as

for the cash itself, I reckon that can be managed."

"How so, pray?" asked Allen, a bit roughly as to manner.

"Well, Salvation City is far from being moribund, and in a mining town like this there is a good deal of the pure stuff in circulation. I can say (without boasting) that my word goes with a majority of the citizens here, and so—with your personal check as security, Mr. Kirkwood—the cash can be raised with no particular difficulty."

"How long a time will it take, though?" asked Allen.

"Ten hours, at the outside."

"Is that so?" with an echo of pleasurable surprise. "Faith, then, you're a mighty good friend to hold council with, Mr. Starlight!"

"Don't mention it. Your father's note or check is good as a government bond, and with either to back me up, I'll answer for the cash. But, how is it to be delivered, and how is Miss Kirkwood to be released?"

Allen shrugged his shoulders a bit before replying.

"Well, that's another tough morsel to swallow, I'm afraid!"

CHAPTER XXVII.

ARRANGING FOR THE RANSOM.

"What do you mean by that, my son?"

"Well, sir, this infernal scoundrel who signs himself Jack Ketch not only set his price, but named his own conditions from start to finish."

"To which we will agree without quibbling," quickly declared Martin Kirkwood. "Nothing in the shape of money shall stand between my little girl and her liberty; you surely know that, Allen?"

"If paying the ransom was all," with another shrug of the shoulders.

"What do you mean?"

"You heard what he had Lorella write about paying over the money, father? Well, he added more to me, in person, so that no room might be left for mistakes. And that little—"

"Go on!"

"You and I are to take the money to the rendezvous, you understand? No other person can go along, either in our company or following as our safeguard. Now, do you begin to see what bothers me, father?"

"You think—you fear the fellow means to play us false?" asked the elder Kirkwood, after a brief pause as for consideration.

"Well, there is rather more than a fair chance for something of the sort. Still, since those are his terms—"

"What do you think of it, Mr. Starlight?" asked the millionaire, looking toward the Sparkler Sport, as though just reminded of his presence by special invitation.

"Looks mightily as though the condition covers a trick of some description," frankly owned the sport. "You say he made an especial point of that, Mr. Kirkwood?"

"Yes," admitted Allen, thoughtfully. "Of course, he had a very plausible reason for so doing—to guard himself against cunning trickery on our side of the board, he declared. And—it may be so!"

"That, of course. Naturally enough, you would be feeling a bit sore under the collar after such usage. Still, to a man up a tree the shoe would seem a better fit for the other foot!"

"Pray explain yourself, Mr. Starlight."

"Well, if you meet his terms, what's to hinder this sweet Jack Ketch from playing you both foul, Mr. Kirkwood?"

"As how?"

"By taking both ransom money and the bearers, of course!"

Martin Kirkwood stared at the speaker with eyes wider than usual, but then the full purport of those words seemed to burst upon his brain and give him a severe shock.

Until now he had thought only of sav-

ing his dearly beloved daughter from rude captivity by paying out a few of his many thousands; but now—the whole affair seemed to take on a vastly different light.

His really remarkable nerve seemed to forsake him all at once, and his tall frame fell to shivering as one under a sudden chill.

Allen broke in quickly, either dropping or hiding his own doubts for sake of his father's peace.

"Of course, 'tis just as well to take all these minor points into consideration while dealing with such ugly devils; still, I hardly think any such double-play will be attempted."

"It might, though. And once caught in such a trap, with all three of you held fast by such an audacious knave—"

"What?"

"Well, sir," with a half smile, half-frown as he met the eager eyes of the old gentleman; "in a case like that, I reckon 'twould make the bank account of even a millionaire look mighty sick before the end of negotiations was fairly reached!"

Allen made a passionate gesture at this, his lips curling away far enough to grant a brief glimpse of his teeth. Then he spoke, crisply:

"I hinted pretty plainly at something like that, myself, but only met with a denial. What more could I do then? What more can we do now?"

"Certainly, we can't afford to waste time while Lorella is held at the full mercy of such infernal rascals?"

"No, no!" exclaimed the maiden's father, his voice all a-tremble with strong feeling. "I'd run the risk and take what comes, rather than prolong her trials even by a single hour!"

"It wouldn't help Miss Kirkwood any for both father and brother to join her in captivity, though, do you reckon, Mr. Kirkwood?"

"But it might add to her danger were we to balk at a purely imaginary peril, though," as quickly spoke the younger Kirkwood. "What else can we do than to accept the conditions imposed, after all?"

"Guard against any lack of faith on the part of our enemies," the Sparkler Sport replied, his face and tones betraying a more than ordinary interest in this affair.

"As how, pray?"

"Yes, Mr. Starlight," from the father, with a poorly hidden eagerness. "Tell us what to do, please! Show us how—the dear child must be saved, remember, no matter what comes to the rest of us. Lorella first of all! First of all, I say!"

"Well, gentlemen, it surely ought to be possible to take such precautions against foul play as to insure fair dealing by the enemy," deliberately said the Sparkler Sport. "With a picked lot of good men—"

Allen Kirkwood flung up a checking hand at this, bluntly speaking:

"Drop that, if you please, Mr. Starlight. I've particular warning against any such play as that, and the risk would be too great—far too great to justify us in taking any such step."

"But, say you were kept in blissful ignorance of the fact?" suggested the Sparkler, with a faint smile.

"That wouldn't help matters in the least, and without you promise to hold back entirely, sir, we'll stop talking over the matter right now and right here."

Allen Kirkwood spoke with almost harsh positivity, and his father seemed surprised, if not hurt, by such apparent rudeness to a guest of his own inviting.

"Allen, surely you don't stop to count your words?"

"I'm counting the consequence of flying in the face of the grim warning given me by Jack Ketch, rather, father," came the swift reply. "He swore that we couldn't make a move without his full knowledge and comprehension. He swore by good and by evil that if we, in any way, shape, or manner veered to either side of his instructions, 'twould be

a sign for breaking off all negotiations, and in place of rescuing Lorella, we would be turning her over to the Strangers for—a plaything!"

A low, husky cry escaped the father at this grim threat, and he shivered anew with fear—not for himself, but for his best-beloved child.

"That's just the way it stands," added Allen, in milder tones. "No man living would better like to fool those infernal hounds, but for now we can't afford to run any long chances. Afterward—but that is another story!"

The Sparkler Sport seemed duly impressed with the serious condition of affairs as thus outlined; yet his first idea was not entirely banished.

"That condition may mean good or evil; may be merely to protect himself against treachery on your part, or may cover an infernal scheme to secure the cash even while holding the prize, and adding to it a couple of others."

"We'll go fully armed, of course, and with eyes opened to possible trickery—well, 'twill be no walkover for Jack Ketch!"

"That is well enough, far as it goes; but why not go further? I'll agree to have a picked force so located that their very existence shall never be so much as suspected by the Strangers so long as play is fair. After—well, if playing foul, they'll be caught in their own snare."

But now Martin Kirkwood was the one to object, positively, almost harshly.

For himself and son, 'twas very little matter; for Lorella 'twas everything. And where he might have argued against the younger, Sparkler Steve quietly bowed submission to the elder Kirkwood.

"Very well, gentlemen; I'm only a low private in this little campaign, and haven't a word to offer further. Only—if there should happen to be anything at all I can do, let me know—as a favor."

"You can aid us in raising the cash, which, after all, seems to be the main point just now," declared Allen, with a fleeting smile. "After that is gathered together, father and I will have to do the rest."

"When did you agree to meet this Jack Ketch, if it's a fair question?" asked the sport, quietly.

"As quickly as the ransom could be provided for—to-morrow, if possible. Why?"

"Merely wished to know. And the place of meeting is—"

But here Allen hesitated, looking keenly, almost suspiciously, into that strong face for several seconds before speaking at all.

"First, sir, give me your word of honor to keep the place secret from all others. Will you do this much?"

"If you ask it—yes," was the ready response. "Why wouldn't I?"

"Well, I didn't know but what you thought of playing a card or two on your own hook, and so—never mind! I can trust you, since father has gone your bail. And so—ever hear of a place called the Painted Flat, Mr. Starlight?"

"Yes. I know the place. A better one could hardly be picked out for such an exchange, either; always granting that both sides of the bargain made were in fair earnest. If not—"

"We've got to play fair. We couldn't afford to do otherwise, if only for Lorella's sake. 'Twould surely be fatal to her hopes of freedom were we to try a double—can't you see that, sir?"

"But, if Ralph Innes be playing the role you seem so confident of," suggested the Sparkler Sport, "surely he'd see no harm came her way?"

Allen Kirkwood frowned blackly, his clenched hand smiting the air savagely as he said:

"I know! That devil is at the bottom of it all! He's scheming, but in this case I really believe the tool is smarter than the master. Innes hires the dirty work done, but—never mind for now. Your check-book, father! We've got to get down to business without more delay."

"Wait—let me see where I can rustle the cash first," said the sport, rising to his feet.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

THE STRANGLER'S SURPRISE PARTY.

Stephen Starlight cut very little time to waste so far as he himself was concerned, and in the course of a very few hours gave the two Kirkwoods, father and son, fair proof that he spoke well inside of the limits when he declared his ability to rustle up the cold cash with no better collateral than his bare word, backed by the millionaire's check-book.

True, those checks were "good as gold," and would pass current for such in any financial center; but Salvation City was hardly within those magic bounds, and lacking the sport's indorsement, the slips of paper would have cut but an ignominious figure.

Still, twenty-five thousand dollars in clean cash is a large sum of money, and even with the Sparkler afoot it took both time and patience to make the collection, although the day was not nearly spent when the full amount was fairly pledged.

Still, the collection itself was not finished until high noon of the day following.

Then Sparkler Steve handed over the amount, for the most part in bank-notes, with a couple of bags containing eagles and double-eagles to fill out the tally.

Starlight refused to hearken to thanks from father or from son, soberly saying before withdrawing:

"Wait until the day is older, my good friends. Maybe I'm doing you injury in place of good; maybe this will only dip you deeper into the worry instead of pulling you all out of it!"

"We'll hope for better things, at least," declared Allen.

"Either way you are fully secured, Mr. Starlight," declared Martin Kirkwood, grasping those hands and pressing them cordially, while tear-moist eyes looked gratefully into those keen blue eyes. "My checks will be honored at once, and then—"

"I'm not thinking of the money, sir," quickly, almost roughly, cried the sport, wresting his hands free and turning abruptly away, paying no heed to the call which was sent after him.

Evidently his feelings were keenly stung, since the time for starting with the ransom money came and passed without aught more being seen of Stephen Starlight. Mr. Kirkwood felt this keenly, but there was no time to waste, and Allen impatiently urged his father to action.

"It'll be all right after he's had time to think it all over, father," he gave assurance, as they set forth upon their hazardous mission, moving so quietly as to attract little or no attention their way. "If not—well, should his fears prove well founded, one thing: we'll hardly come back to hear him croak, 'I told ye so!'"

Through all those financial negotiations the real secret had been carefully kept by the Sparkler Sport, and few if any of the citizens now to be seen astir on those streets had even the faintest suspicion of the purpose which took father and son abroad that fair afternoon.

This was all the better, considering what grim point Jack Ketch made of secrecy concerning the transfer of booty for beauty, yet Martin Kirkwood shivered a bit as he fairly left the town, looking back to see never a friendly face or hand giving them good luck!

Allen Kirkwood acted feverishly eager to get it all over with, and it was well enough that the old gentleman had sound legs and good muscles to back them up, for the next hour or more was a busy one for them both.

Only waiting to make sure they were not being followed or watched by any

curious citizens, Allen Kirkwood picked his course as directly as the lay of the ground would permit, for the spot locally known as Painted Flat, from its curiously contrasted rocks of a round dozen hues, here running in regular layers, yonder broken into bits and blots of bright or dull color, yet all of sufficient contrast and oddity to fully merit the appellation bestowed upon that valley.

For valley it was, almost circular in shape, surrounded on all sides by fairly high hills, rough, rocky, and broken, with here and there a narrow defile leading into or out of the sunken plateau.

For such it might well be termed. It was level to a marvel, considering its surroundings, and, unlike the vast majority of vallies, was almost barren, so far as green vegetation was concerned.

Lifted high above all surroundings, 'twould have been a great mesa, and natural enough; lying thus, 'twas a natural curiosity.

It took some little time to scale those rough and broken rocks for a first glimpse of the Painted Flat, and more than once the old gentleman was obliged to pause for breath. The last time of doing so, he looked back, and far away he caught a glimpse of Salvation City itself.

At another time, with less vital interests at stake, he might have enjoyed studying the scenery; but now he thought only of reaching their journey's end as quickly as possible.

If only—but he would not give way to such ugly doubts!

Side by side father and son surmounted that natural barrier, then flashed eager looks over the vari-hued valley lying stretched before their eyes, each one looking for some sign or token of the Strangers.

Nothing which looked like human life was visible, however, and Martin Kirkwood was about to express at least a portion of his doubts, when he gave a sharp ejaculation, gripping an arm of his son tightly as he pointed toward a portion of that rocky ridge at no great distance from their present position.

"Look, Allen! Something is—who is it, yonder?"

Allen gripped revolver with nervous hand, but then drew a long breath of evident relief as he both saw and recognized that object.

"A bear, father," he said, as that object came out into fairer view. "Looking for worms or mice, I reckon. It'll not bother us if we don't interfere with it; never fear."

"I wasn't—I thought it might be one of those—the Strangers, as they call themselves. Now—I don't see anything of them!"

Allen laughed, shortly, yet with a degree of nervousness perceptible which he would have been the last to admit was possible.

"Hardly, father! Jack Ketch is no fool, whatever else he may be called. He'll never show his ugly mug so long as there is a possible doubt of our playing a square game."

"Then you think—"

"That his eyes are watching us this very moment: yes!" with dogged emphasis. "His, and doubtless those of enough other knaves to kick all the fat into the fire if we were so rash as to ring in a cold deck. I wish it was all well over with, daddy!"

"We'll play our part through to the end, Allen, and then we will have naught to blame ourselves with should aught go wrong," bravely spoke the elder Kirkwood, again moving forward.

"Where were you to meet the fellow, son?"

"Down yonder, near the center of the valley," answered Allen, casting another look toward yonder prowling bear; but "Old Eph" paid them no attention, leisurely turning over the stones with his armed paws in quest of his beloved "small deer."

Together the two men carried the

ransom money down into the valley and out to the center of the flat, without seeing augat of the enemy, and then, just when son as well as father appeared to dread failure on the part of Jack Ketch and his Strangers, the surprise was sprung.

Here and there, all around the two ransom-bearers, flat stones which had covered each an armed man, were flung up and aside, then the rush was made, amid yells and cries of savage mockery and triumph combined.

Martin Kirkwood was made an easy prey, for the amazing surprise appeared to paralyze him for the moment, but Allen showed fierce fight, jerking revolver and firing a couple of shots ere he could be fairly tackled by the enemy, Jack Ketch at their head.

To all seeming the young man went down with senses if not life itself fairly knocked out of him, so lusty was the arm which dealt the finishing blow; but for the moment Martin Kirkwood gave no thought to his son or to himself: all was for Lorella!

How true the forebodings which he had so stubbornly banished, time and time again! All false—all foul!

And so, when Jack Ketch came up in front of the now bound man, Martin Kirkwood burst forth in fierce denunciations of such vile treachery.

The Chief of the Strangers laughed at such impotent fury, and even when the younger man showed signs of regaining consciousness, and was again upon his feet, with a couple of stalwart Strangers holding fast to his arms, while curses hot and heavy were poured forth upon the villain who had played such a treacherous game, still Jack Ketch laughed.

"See that he don't do worse than chin-chin, lads," was his only remark drawn forth by Allen's flood of fury; then he turned again to the elder Kirkwood, speaking with a cold sneer in his voice:

"Why, you poor, blind idiot! Talk about treacherous dealing on my part, will you? Howl because I haven't done just as the actual bargain ran? Bah! If I had stuck to the contract, where would you be right now?"

"My child—my poor little girl! Oh, you devil of devils! Tell me just what—"

With a swift movement Jack Ketch struck hand over those lips, cutting short that speech, then swiftly saying ere Mr. Kirkwood could speak further:

"Tell you, is it? Ay, I'll tell you—just this much: if I hadn't broken away from the bargain made with your precious son, yonder, where would you be this minute? Dead, you fool! For—he hired me to play this trick to your death, Martin Kirkwood!"

A hoarse cry burst from lips of Allen Kirkwood at this monstrous charge, but he seemed actually deprived of physical strength by those words, standing helpless in the Strangers' grip, trembling like a leaf.

Martin Kirkwood looked from mask to that ghastly pale face, seemingly at a loss to comprehend just what was being revealed.

"What do you mean, sir? Surely—not Allen?"

"I mean that only for my playing false, as you term it, you'd be a corpse this holy second!" repeated Jack Ketch, sternly. "Your son offered us this very lump of money for killing his father: yourself, no less!"

A brief pause, during which Martin Kirkwood seemed fairly petrified, but then he broke loose, leaping upon and knocking Jack Ketch down.

"You lying demon! I'll kill you for that foul lie!" he cried, hotly.

CHAPTER XXIX.

THE STRANGLER'S DOUBLE CROSS.

It was the act of a man turned fairly wild by what he deemed an unparalleled insult, and for the moment Martin Kirk-

wood seemed gifted with supernatural powers.

Lusty knave though he was, Jack Ketch went down before the old gentleman like an infant before a giant, too utterly surprised to make even a show of defense.

But then his fellows jumped to the rescue, downing the millionaire to the full as swiftly, if not quite so harshly.

Allen Kirkwood likewise set up a struggle, striving all he knew how to break free from his guardians, but in vain. The feet were promptly knocked from under him, and he struck the stony ground with a force which fairly drove the breath out of his body.

With stout cords which had been provided with an eye to this very end, arms were bound securely, and that without inflicting serious injury upon either of the prisoners.

This one point seemed uppermost in the mind of Jack Ketch, for he had scarcely measured his length before the father's fierce blow, than he yelled to his fellows to take, not slay or harm.

All passed with remarkable rapidity, and almost before full notes could have been taken by a disinterested spectator, the work was over, the two men bound past working further harm to their enemy, and Jack Ketch was upon his feet, revolver drawn, overlooking the whole affair.

"Get a hustle on, you fellows!" he harshly ordered, mask still hiding his features from inspection. "We've got both boodle and men, now we want to climb out o' this in a holy hurry!"

Allen cursed, Martin strove to question, but brutal blows silenced them both, and then they were hurried away over the Painted Flat, heading for one of the narrow defiles which marked that side of the valley opposite the distant town of Salvation.

Keen eyes were constantly on the alert against possible foul play on the part of the Kirkwood pair, but nothing more alarming than a gray-coated bear was within eye-range, placidly searching for worms up near that rocky crest.

"Heap o' mighty good meat gwine to waste over yender, boss," one of the Strangers ventured to say; but Jack Ketch did not see fit to act favorably upon the hint.

"You let the bear alone, Dan, and it'll not bite you. Lively, all! We've got too much worth right here to throw away even the ghost of a chance. Lively—for the horses, now!"

Utterly helpless, the two prisoners were hurried along, Allen sullenly furious, his father growing dejected as he began to fairly realize how terribly disastrous their venture was panning out.

For himself he cared nothing, for Allen but little more. They were strong men, and able to bear up against all that might befall; but Lorella! That was, oh, so different!

What awful fate would be hers, now that Jack Ketch had successfully played his double game of treachery? And as he asked himself this question, his mind was haunted by the answer given by Allen: turned over to be the mock and sport of those pitiless demons, the Strangers of the Silver Slope!

Stung to the heart by such crushing fears, Martin Kirkwood again and again strove to get word from the lips of the leader, but at most he only won evasions or ugly curses.

Just then Jack Ketch was bent on gaining the spot where their animals had been left while the ambushade was in waiting, acting as though he feared some equally cunning effort to turn the tables, eyes always on the rove to guard against possible surprise.

Nothing of the kind took place, and the Painted Flat was fairly crossed without aught which even hinted at trickery on the part of the friends to the Kirkwoods.

Diving into one of the narrow cracks which led deviously through that crater-

like wall of bare rocks to fairly open country beyond, Jack Ketch hurried his men on with their captives, never halting or slackening pace until the tethered horses were fairly won.

"Good enough!" was his hearty exclamation at this. "Hoist 'em up, there, lads; it's hustle takes the cake, and we're playing for the entire bakery right now!"

Again did Martin Kirkwood venture a question as to his daughter, and now the Chief of the Strangers found time in which to give him at least the semblance of an answer.

"The young lady is all right, my venerable gudgeon, so don't worry. I'm taking you to her side as directly as possible. After that meeting; well, that's a different thing!"

"You've got the ransom money, and now—"

"We mean to keep it, of course. That merely pays us for the work already done. Afterwards—"

"Don't talk to the hound, father," harshly cut in the younger Kirkwood. "You'll get nothing better than foulest lies from him, so—what is the use wasting breath?"

Jack Ketch made no effort to check this far from complimentary speech, and even chuckled in seeming amusement as the young man ceased.

"You're another, Allen, my boy!" he cried, seemingly with reckless amusement. "Lies? No, no, my innocent lad. I'm going to ladle out truth in huge gobs for the old gentleman, although I'm not so certain you'll enjoy the feast overly much."

"You devil! I'll pay you off for all this some day!"

"Indeed? Then I reckon I might better get in my pretty work right now, so you can be ciphering out just how large a sum you really owe me. So—you called me a traitor, back yonder, Mr. Kirkwood," he added.

A brief pause, during which Allen forced a harsh laugh, like one who strove to counteract evil in advance; then the outlaw spoke on:

"I'm not denying that I played just a bit crooked, sir, but this much I can and do claim: if I hadn't done just so, you would be turning cold this holy minute, and your soul would know—what the rest of us are fully aware of—that your murder lay at the door of—Allen Kirkwood, your hopeful son, yonder!"

Martin Kirkwood shrank and shivered before these pitilessly clear tones, but Allen laughed again, then fell to cursing the man who so devilishly strove to add to one crime another even more diabolical.

"You couldn't tell the naked truth if your very life depended upon it," he cried, fiercely, wrestling with his bonds as only a man thoroughly desperate can do. "Why would I attempt such an infernal trick, you cur?"

"That's just what I'm coming to, Mr. Kirkwood," added the Chief of the Strangers, paying no heed to the younger prisoner. "Of course it hits you mighty hard, coming so near to where you live, but the truth is gospel, and I'll make you see the whole pretty trick before I'm clean through with you."

"It's been a set-up job from start to finish, and Allen Kirkwood has done the chief engineering. He hired us to jump your camp, and promised us a cool ten thousands chucks to begin with, if we'd croak you: murder you, to speak with the bark on!"

"A lie—all an infernal lie!" hoarsely cried Allen.

"Put a muzzle on that calf, fellows," coldly commanded Jack Ketch, throwing up a hand as he turned head that way.

Blindly obeying, the Strangers surrounded the prisoner, some holding him helpless, while others applied a heavy muffler, which served all purposes of a gag, while being far more easily adjusted.

This done, the little cavalcade resumed

its progress, and again Jack Ketch assailed the ears of the elder Kirkwood with what purported, rightly or wrongfully, to be a blunt confession of unparalleled wickedness.

"It's gospel truth, old gentleman; Allen is an old-time pal, who has led a double life for more years than you could guess, back east. He hunted me up, out here, and made his proposition; to dump you for good and all, then to get shut of his sister, when, as a matter of course he would come in for all your wealth.

"Easy enough, with all the chances your whim of camping-out gave him, don't you see? But—well, I agreed to play my part in the pretty little game precisely as set down by Allen, but—somehow it occurred to me that there ought to be bigger money in the layout, and, anyhow, the black-hearted devil didn't ought to win such a nasty game!

"Mind you, Kirkwood; everything was played up in high G, so far as Allen was concerned. And, though you did slip through the noose over yonder, by what still looks mightily like a miracle to me, up to that very hour I played strictly according to Hoyle!

"Then—well, what's the use drawing it out so long? That happening first led me to thinking more carefully, and the result is—just like this! I'd cheat the son, and take the father alive in place of leaving him an ugly corpse, as I was hired to do!"

Martin Kirkwood listened through all, but the very magnitude of the crime thus brutally outlined, proved its own antidote. He could not give it full credence, and so declared.

"A lie: it's all a foul lie, to put the cap-sheaf on your devilish doings!" he cried, sternly.

Jack Ketch shrugged shoulders like one careless as to what another might think, then spoke again:

"All right, my covey! Keep on thinking that way until I show you proofs which even a father can't refuse to recognize. Until then—lively, all! Time we were getting there with all feet!"

After this but few words were wasted, even the voluble-tongued Jack Ketch declining to enter into argument or conversation with his elder captive.

For several hours longer that journey was pressed as rapidly as the nature of the ground to be crossed would permit; but at the end of that period, the Chief of the Strangers rose in his stirrups, to cry out:

"Good enough! We're getting there, my handsome friends! And then—well, after the Kirkwood family is fairly assembled, we'll decide just what comes next: death, marriage, liberty; which?"

Jack Ketch broke off with a laugh which certainly was not the most agreeable sound in all the world, at least to father and son.

CHAPTER XXX.

THE SPARKLER SPORT AT WORK.

Jack Ketch might have fared better in the end if he had listened with a more obliging ear to the half-hinted wish of his fellow, yonder in the valley known as the Painted Flat.

Not that bruin would have made such choice eating as the Strangler inferred, but its killing certainly would have benefited that lawless outfit far more than any one thing they could have accomplished that day.

For, while the skin was genuine enough, and perfect from nose to stumpy tail, save for the slit which ran along the belly, its contents were scarcely such as a well-regulated bear-hide covers in life.

Certainly no bear could have been more innocently occupied before, during, and after the coming upon the scene of the Kirkwoods, father and son; but that acting was purely such, for inside that shaggy hide the Sparkler Sport was adroitly carrying out the audacious scheme which his fertile brain had studied up after his

being denied the privilege of playing a more open part in that affair of booty for beauty.

Starlight was more than half convinced that the Chief of the Strangers contemplated trickery when Allen Kirkwood told of the rigid conditions imposed by the outlaw; and so he determined to do all that lay in his power to foil the arch-villain.

Denied the liberty of acting in the open, he took steps accordingly, under cover of night conveying the bear-hide from town to the vicinity of the Painted Flat, there leaving it securely hidden until his return.

In order to be first upon the scene, Sparkler Steve pretended to take offense at the manner of the millionaire, then left town unobserved in ample time to get everything in readiness for playing his part.

How that part was played has been seen clearly enough for all purposes, although a few words more may not come amiss.

While afraid to venture into the open, lest his natural awkwardness betray his attempted deception to the enemy, Sparkler Sport was ready and more than willing to chip in if he saw even a half-chance of saving the Kirkwoods and foiling the Strangers, in case his worst suspicions should prove correct.

Naturally enough, however, Starlight expected the enemy to come into sight from one of those crooked defiles, in which case he would have ample time in which to determine whether or no it would be advisable to play a bold hand.

That cunning ambush surprised him to the full as much as it did his friends, and the capture followed so swiftly that he had no time to take a hand in, even if he had deemed such action advisable.

This he did not, for Lorella was absent, and her safety, her freedom, was paramount.

Thanks to that ambush being laid in the very centre of the colored valley, the Strangers were a long revolver-shot from the nearest rocks, and so, even if he had thought it best, Sparkler Steve could hardly have chipped in when Jack Ketch went down before the indignant father, without fully advertising his coming to the tough nuts there engaged.

As already shown, that struggle was brief-lived, and then even the ghost of a chance was lost for the time being.

When the Strangers finally started off with their captives, the disguised Sport watched them, taking especial note of the defile toward which they were moving, at the same time picking his own way among those thick-lying rocks toward the crest nearest Salvation City.

All this without the appearance of haste which might, in suspicious eyes, fetch awkward attention that way, yet making such good time that he was crossing the crest even as the Strangers entered that defile.

Then, producing from inside his hairy covering a bright scarlet handkerchief, Sparkler Steve quickly fastened it upon a stick already prepared, planting the miniature flag where it could be distinctly seen from afar: exactly what the sport desired!

"Lively, now!" Starlight muttered as he rose up to cast off his covering, so far as head and face were concerned, shading eyes as he gazed eagerly in the direction of Salvation City like one fully expecting an answer to that brilliant signal. "Come! You can't come any too soon for me, my brave lads!"

A few moments later his keen eyes caught sight of an answering signal, far away in the direction of the town, and giving a long breath of relief, the sport replaced the hairy mask, turning again in the direction of the Painted Flat.

"Pity to lose time, but better keep on the safe side a bit longer, I reckon!" was his muttered comment as he again resumed his posture of bruin, and shamled

awkwardly over the rise and down to the level below.

He headed direct for the narrow pass through which the Strangers picked their way with their captives, making as rapid progress as possible under the conditions.

Although he hardly looked for such a thing, the Sparkler Sport knew it was barely possible that Jack Ketch had left a guard at the mouth of the defile, to make sure no enemy was following.

Treacherous himself, what more likely than that he should suspect others of being equally tricky?

As matters turned out, this was a useless precaution on the part of the sport, but while he regretted the loss of time (for he might have covered the same distance in less than half the time as a man) he could not fairly blame himself.

First making sure there were no spies hidden nigh that point, the sport quickly set up a signal which would be readily seen from yonder crest, thus marking the pass to be taken by his men who were already in brisk motion as he felt fully assured.

This done, Starlight cast off his disguise for good and all, stowing it away in a rocky crevice from whence it might be recovered later on in case all went well with his risky plans.

Then the bold fellow pressed on through the defile, tucking under his belt a number of white strips of cloth which were to be used for blazing the trail, to enable his men to follow at speed and so the more readily overtake their leader.

This was not the first time Starlight had played scout, and difficult though the nature of the ground made that task right now, by exercising his keen judgment a little in conjunction with his eyes, he found little trouble in reaching the spot where the Strangers had left their animals to await the result of that cunning ambuscade.

After this it proved far more easy trailing, thanks to hoofs of horses rather than to feet of men, and leaving yet another of his little signal-flags, Sparkler Steve pressed on at a good round rate.

Thanks to the broken country through which the Strangers were obliged to retreat, an active man on foot could very well keep pace with a mounted party, and until he won his first glimpse of the gang, Starlight did even better: he gained little by little upon the enemy, only slackening up in his efforts when fairly and surely hanging near their rear.

Apparently Jack Ketch had no fears of being tracked, since he took no precautions against followers. Doubtless he felt safe in the conditions insisted upon as an important part of the ransom payment.

Be that as it may, Sparkler Steve found it fairly easy work trailing the enemy after once coming in fair distance, and so, too, aided by the little white flags which were placed at each turn or obscure part of the trail, did the men whom the sport counted upon to back him up in the work yet remaining to be done.

Little by little they gained upon their leader, and before the sun was fairly hiding itself behind the hills toward the west, the little squad of "solid men" were greeting their chief.

Picked men, one and all, chosen by Starlight with an eye single to hot work against possible odds in case his suspicions of foul play were founded upon fact.

Outwardly conforming to the conditions made by Allen Kirkwood, the sport did more work than merely securing the cold cash requisite for a fair exchange of Lorella for ransom, yet so carefully covering his movements that not even the men he enlisted for the campaign knew just what was to be done, or whom their weapons were to be turned against.

They knew nothing whatever concerning that proposed ransom, and only knew that they were to keep close watch upon

yonder rocky rise, to immediately move in case a red flag should show itself in that quarter.

When they joined the Sparkler Sport they were scarcely better posted as to facts, although they might naturally suspect; their faces betrayed curiosity, but their tongues said naught until Sparkler himself set the example.

By this time there was no reason why they should be kept longer in ignorance, and so Starlight frankly informed his men just what was in the wind, and just what he counted on their doing after he had set them a fair example.

Not a single dissenting voice was raised when he made those facts known. Not one of that selected band but was eager to close in a death-lock with Jack Ketch and his band of Strangers.

Steadily, cautiously yet boldly, the picked band tracked the lawless outfit fairly to their rendezvous, growing a bit impatient as the sun was lost to view and the shades of night began to settle over the earth once more.

If that chase was prolonged, there was serious risk of losing the trail in the deepening darkness, and that delay might be fatal to their hopes of rescuing the Kirkwood family: for Sparkler Steve felt firmly convinced the father and son were now being conducted directly to where the sister and daughter lay a captive.

Hence it was with great relief that, from all signs, the rescuing party felt fairly assured that the end was nigh, the rendezvous close at hand; and one and all of the party prepared for the dangerous work which yet remained to be done.

They were not granted a great deal of time in which to make those preparations, either, for it seemed scarcely possible that the Strangers had fairly entered camp, ere the moment for action came.

Loud shouts and fierce cries gave the signal, and Starlight cried:

"Come, lads! That means business, so—up and at 'em, red-hot!"

CHAPTER XXXI.

JUST IN THE NICK OF TIME.

There were other absentees from Salvation City on this eventful day, and at least two of them were heading for the same point where the Strangers had rendezvoused after dispatching Allen Kirkwood with terms and conditions for the ransom of Lorella.

Those two were man and woman, both of whom held a strong interest in the affairs of the Kirkwoods, as will be recognized when their names are given.

Contrary to the traditional rule, the young woman was acting as guide, though it called for no urging to keep the man close at hand, and the lead was permitted merely because of her better knowledge.

That young woman was Kittie Crooks, the young man was Ralph Innes, and their destination was the very point where Lorella Kirkwood was held in captivity by the grim guard placed over her by Jack Ketch in person before he started out to bag his other living game.

Kittie had been first to propose that venture, watching her chance and quickly enlisting the services of the private secretary when and where no other curious eye or ear might take awkward note.

It was mainly because her wounded and helpless father desired it, she hastened to make the young man understand. She dared not trust the other parties interested, and so—

Ralph Innes only too gladly welcomed the chance.

"I'd do anything in reason to clear my record, so foully besmirched by Allen Kirkwood," Ralph gave assurance. "Only—I'd rather pull the hemp I'm threatened with than see you risk your life or liberty, Miss Crooks!"

At any other time this earnestness might have brought a blush of pleasure

to those cheeks, but not now: Kittie felt that the world itself was pretty much the same as dead to her.

So, quickly, gravely, earnestly she spoke on, telling how her company must be endured, since she could show but hardly describe the cunningly hidden spot where it was almost certain Miss Kirkwood was now awaiting rescue.

"It's for Daddy: all for father," she added, voice breaking a bit in spite of her tensely-strung nerves. "If you will not help—"

"I will, and give you a thousand thanks in the bargain!" declared Innes, with strong sincerity unless his face and eyes told lies.

In order to gain the distant rendezvous in time for arranging their plans before the coming of night, and to make certain Lorella was really held captive there, the adventurers had to leave Salvation City quite early in the day.

This they contrived to do without calling particular attention their way, save that Ralph found Barney O'Shea still dogging him, though keeping at a fairly safe distance.

A little quick maneuvering threw the camp-cook off the scent long enough for their purpose, and then Innes hastened to the hills, there to join his fair guide, Kittie Crooks.

Together they picked their way deeper into the hills, crossing the little river where Peter Peltz had given them the slip so recklessly, pressing on and on without tiring in their eagerness to make a fair record which might help the public to a more just estimate of their merits.

And so, some little time before the sun dipped behind the western rocks, Kittie and Ralph won a position from whence they might learn for certain whether or no their hopes were well-founded; whether Lorella Kirkwood was indeed held a prisoner here, awaiting the result of Jack Ketch's double play at Painted Flat.

Cautious scouting finally convinced Innes that such was indeed the case, although as yet he could only make a vague guess as to how many of the Strangers were here at the retreat.

Then he made known the decision long since arrived at in his mind:

"You have done your part, Miss Crooks, and now must wait for me to do mine. I'll go in yonder, alone—"

"I am going, too, Mr. Innes."

"No. You must wait here. I mean it, my dear girl," he said firmly, as he saw signs of rebellion. "With you in danger, I'd lose all of my nerve. I would be thinking and caring for you, rather than of or for my cousin. So—I go in yonder alone, remember."

A slow flush crept into Kittie's face as Ralph spoke thus, his strong hands holding hers captive. Those brown eyes said far more than lips as yet dared utter, and—well, after all, Kittie was a woman, and if she read the glad truth, why not?

And so, not daring wait until the night had fairly fallen, although by doing so he would have a friendly screen to his movements, Ralph Innes looked to his weapons, then as cautiously as might be began his perilous venture.

Fortunately there was no lack of natural cover, and, making the best possible use of this, the young man was not so very long in winning a position from whence he could peer forth upon a small and rude hut made of boughs and leafy brush—a temporary expedient, and one which had not existed long, as the scarcely faded leaves assured him.

In front of this hut, squatting close to the opening which might be closed by a flap of blanket, now flung to one side and upward, squatted a burly shape which looked strangely familiar to Ralph at first glance, and which, only a few seconds later he recognized as none other than the Strangler, Peter Peltz!

Staring with wide eyes, scarcely able to credit their evidence, the young man

soon learned enough to convince himself that Lorella Kirkwood must be inside yonder shanty, and then he cautiously withdrew, making a circuit until he could approach the shelter from the rear.

So far, Ralph had failed to see or hear aught of other enemies, but even while he was debating whether or no 'twould be advisable to make an open attack upon the Strangler, he heard other sounds which warned him of odds too heavy for chancing.

He crept up to the rear of the hut without attracting attention his way, and then looked and listened, using ears while seeking an aperture among those half-dry leaves by means of which he might learn for certain just who was within the rude shelter.

"I fooled the idiot and his fancy girl!" the Strangler was saying, in coarse, harsh tones. "While he searched for me, on top as well as under the surface, I was lying snugly under the bank, laughing at his efforts."

"Laughing, and yet—cursing as well! Do you ask why? Because I had marked him as my own! Because he even then bore upon his throat the red brand of the Strangler! Because—ah-h-h! How I hated him then; how I hate him now!"

"Why should you hate him so bitterly?" asked a softer voice, which Ralph instantly recognized for that of his fair cousin. "Surely Mr. Innes never worked you harm or injury, sir?"

"Did he not? Was it nothing that he slipped through my clutches even after the death-touch was painted upon his throat? Was it naught that he—ah-h-h! That throat of yours, my lady! How lovely it looks now as you—ha! ha! ha!"

"Why do you shrink away and breathe so rapidly, darling? Why do you cringe and shiver as though—I wonder—fool! What made him leave me here to be tempted like—tempted of the devil! Ha! ha! ha!"

Lorella was not the only one trembling at those suddenly altered tones, for Ralph recalled his own hideous usage yonder in this strangling demon's mountain home, and now—surely he would not dare—

"Strangle—choke and strangle!" cried Peter Peltz, his voice growing fairly devilish as he sprung to his feet and swiftly unwound a pliable rope from about his middle. "I'll caress that dainty neck until it turns—ha!"

For Ralph Innes, daring wait no longer, came around the hut with a dash, leaping straight at the Strangler, striking with reversed pistol, hoping thus to dispose of Peltz without noise sufficient to call the other outlaws to that spot.

Peter dodged, his foot slipping and fetching him to earth, but he was up as quickly, flashing forth an ugly-looking knife and leaping to meet his adversary, eyes ablaze and face that of a veritable fiend.

The two men came together with a shock, then wrestled for a few seconds, falling in a confused heap to earth.

A wild, hoarse yell told of painful death, and Ralph tore himself free to see only the haft of the Strangler's knife; the blade was buried in his bosom, and already death was claiming its evil prey!

Then came angry cries, followed by still others from beyond.

CHAPTER XXXII.

THE LAST OF THE STRANGERS.

These were the sounds which told the Sparkler Sport he had no time to waste if he hoped to make a clean sweep in that quarter.

"Come, lads!" he cried, setting the good example himself and rushing forward through those deepening shadows.

No doubt it was fortunate for himself and allies that the whole attention of Jack Ketch and party was taken up by what was going on in their front, for that

gave the rescuers time and chance to fairly close in before their coming was so much as suspected.

For a few moments matters looked very squally for Ralph Innes, even after so luckily disposing of the Strangler, Peter Peltz.

"Quick!" cried Kittie Crooks, springing actively to his side, revolver drawn and ready for service. "They are coming! Save Miss Kirkwood and leave me to—back, ye demons! Back, or I'll shoot—to kill!"

Several guards were coming with a rush, and, though they hesitated at sight of armed enemies, 'twas for but a moment or two; then charging on with savage oaths and vicious yells.

No time then for flight! To turn back now would almost surely mean death from the rear. And so—two pistols began to bark, and Kittie fought shoulder to shoulder with Ralph in defense of Lorella.

For a few minutes matters were very lively in that quarter, bullets flying recklessly, steel a-flash, blood flowing here and there, while grim death was reaping a dread harvest.

The Sparkler Sport closed in with a vengeance, shooting straight and striking hard, knowing that under circumstances like these the "only good Strangler was a dead Strangler."

The weight of numbers was in their favor, but twilight seemed to at least double the ranks of their assailants, and so the Strangers fought at a disadvantage. Then, too, they lost their leader early in the fight, he going down before Allen Kirkwood, who had in some as yet unexplained manner burst or slipped his bonds.

Then the cry of victory mingled with other cries for quarter, and the Sparkler Sport quickly brought forth order from seeming chaos.

Before this time father and daughter were together, one laughing and sobbing in the same breath, the other silent in his great relief and thankfulness.

Fires were quickly kindled, and by the ruddy glow thus afforded stock was taken and the results summed up.

He who had figured as Jack Ketch was dead, slain with his own knife, guided by the vengeful hand of Allen Kirkwood, that black mask still covering his face from view.

When it was removed, the features of a notorious "bad man" called Mack Hanson were revealed, and one portion of the Strangler mystery was cleared away for all time.

Another came to light when, among those of the enemy mortally wounded, Vincent Messick, the Salvation City sport and gambler, was found.

Meanwhile explanations among the living and unharmed were in order, and, thanks to Lorella giving her evidence in their favor, both Kittie and Ralph stood clear of suspicion which might otherwise have proved awkward, being found in such evil company.

Even now Allen Kirkwood, but little the worse for his death-grapple with "Jack Ketch," viewed his cousin savagely, and if left to himself might have added another killing to his red record that night.

Harshly enough he ordered Innes to stand aside, nor disgrace his blood relatives by contact while his record remained uncleared.

"And, without you can clear it, here's fair warning that I'll send you up a tree, or, failing that, kill you with my own hand! Even now I hold you guilty; even now I believe you were at the bottom of all this crime and, scheming, Ralph Innes!"

But the mystery was not to endure much longer, for the Sparkler Sport, holding a notion of his own, took time and opportunity to question Vin Messick a bit in private, then called those more nearly interested in learning the whole

truth to the side of the mortally injured gambler.

For Messick had indeed turned his last trump, and by playing upon his holy horror (which is entertained by so many of the craft) of "dying with his boots on," Sparkler Steve induced him to make a full and free confession.

No need of entering fully into that confession, since so much of what Messick told has already been shadowed forth in these pages. Enough that he fully exonerated both Ralph Innes and Allen Kirkwood of wrong-doing or treacherous plotting in connection with the Strangers.

Messick himself had planned the bold game, easily interesting Mack Hanson and his reckless gang by pledging them gold galore in case all should work smoothly.

The attempt to kill Martin Kirkwood by the strangler's rope was genuine, Messick reasoning that such savage work would surely cow the imperious will of the son, and so make the ultimate fleecing all the more easy to accomplish.

Messick, too, suggested throwing suspicion upon the private secretary as a shield to his own participation; but it was "Jack Ketch" who suggested blackening the fame of the son in the father's eyes, later on.

Knowing now what stern metal they had to deal with, and knowing how mercilessly they would be hunted down in case either or both of the male Kirkwoods should escape their clutches with life, it was determined to work one against the other, "bleed" the millionaire as much as possible, then—end all by a double or even a triple slaying!

Only a man who knew his death was certain could or would have made such a full and damning confession; but it was well that it should be thus; with less positive proof, ugly suspicions might have lingered long and rankled sore. As it was, Allen Kirkwood frankly owned his mistake, and the cousins were cousins once more!

It was fated that the tie of relationship should never be changed, never drawn closer.

Although Lorella and Ralph were promised in marriage, neither had been "dead in love," nor did either now regard the other with even so faint a passion.

Ralph had tumbled "over head and ears in love" with the girl of the mountains, despite her unfortunate associations, and now that Kittie hung her head in grief for her erring father, Ralph felt that he must stick all the closer to his love; and so he did!

And Lorella?

Well, of course, she wouldn't own as much, even in the most secret depths of her heart, but it was none the less a fact; she had found a master in the man of adventure, Stephen Starlight, the Sparkler Sport.

Their eyes met as their hands came together after that rescue was fairly assured. Few words were spoken, and none at all which savored aught of love or love-making; yet the glad truth was clear to both man and maid, and the Sparkler was well content to bide his time for the rest.

The dead Strangers were buried where they fell, the wounded and the prisoners were taken across to Salvation City, there to meet with the reward best suited to their recent actions. And so they may be left.

Nelson Crooks expressed great relief when the news was broken to him, and he evidently felt that he had made some slight amends for his past mistakes. Still, his hurts proved too serious for recovery, and, after a few weeks of suffering, the mountaineer died, a far better man than he had lived!

It was a heavy blow to Kittie, but she was not left alone in the world, after all. Ralph begged for her hand, even as he held her heart, and when Nelson Crooks

asked Kittie to let him see her a wife ere she was left an orphan, Kittie finally consented.

Martin Kirkwood gave away the bride, and Lorella, with Starlight, was bridesmaid—if such terms are admissible in connection with such a sad and quiet wedding.

Later on a far more "brilliant affair" was recorded in all the papers, and the main ones concerned were—but why repeat?

Enough that, at latest accounts, the "Sparkler Sport" had calmed down as a husband and father, and of one thing you may rest assured: he will never teach his sons to follow in his earlier footsteps!

THE END.

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